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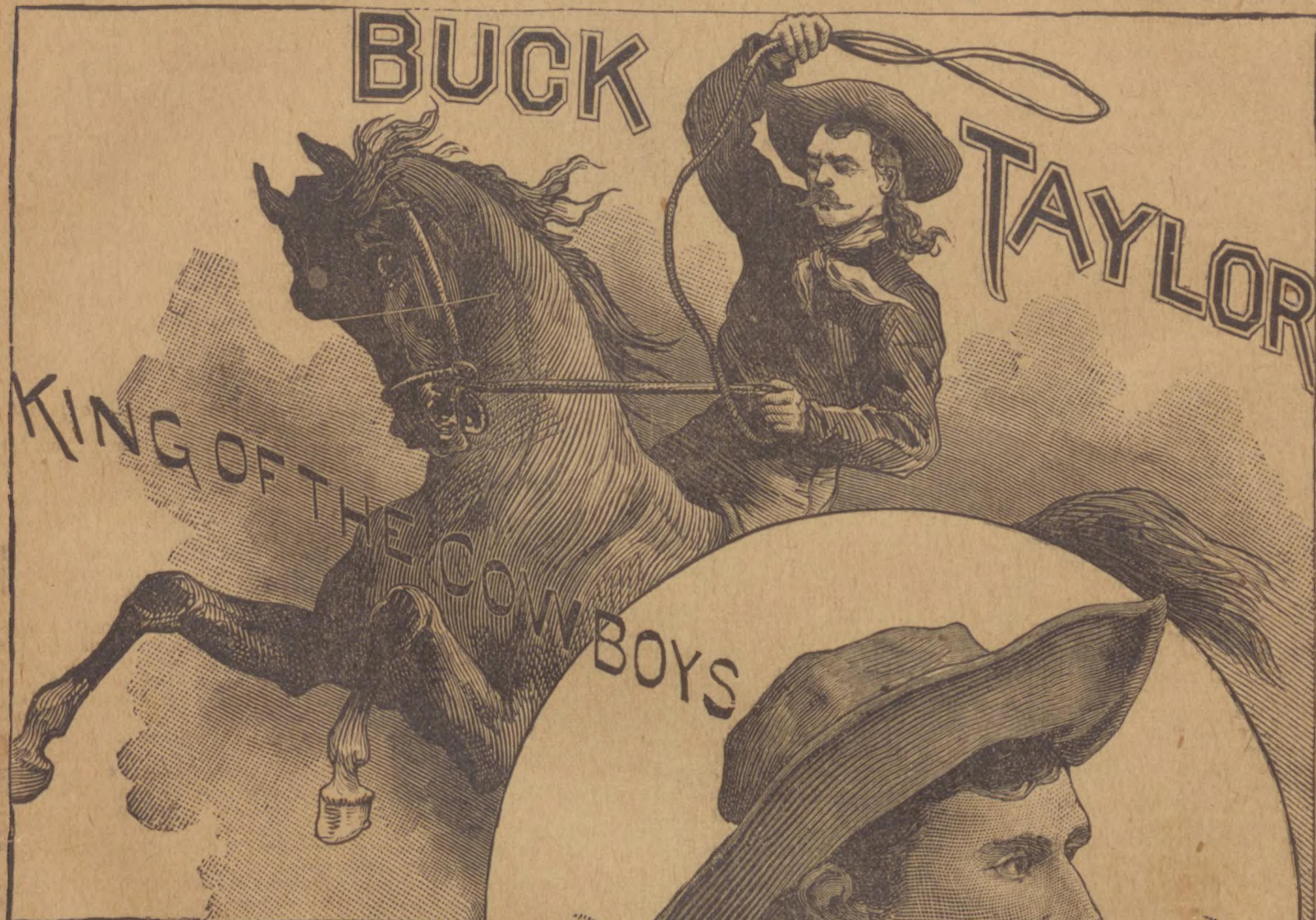
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OR,
The Raiders AND THE Rangers.

A Story of the Wild and Thrilling
Life of William L. Taylor.*

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL," "WILD BILL,"
"TEXAS JACK," "BUCKSKIN SAM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE VOLUNTEER RANGER.

A CRY of warning rung out from a man
guarding a camp on a Texas prairie.

In a timber motte of several acres, around

* W. L. Taylor, of Texas, and now with Buffalo
Bill's Wild West. Buck Taylor is also known as
"Wild Will, the Dare Devil Rider."—THE AUTHOR.

BUCK TAYLOR.

Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.

which ran a small stream, was a camp, or bivouac of horsemen, a gallant band of Texan Rangers, resting after a hard ride on an Indian trail, and with their horses picketed out upon the prairie to feed, while they slept away the sultry hours of the afternoon.

One of the number only stood on guard, and he was half asleep as he leant against a tree, his face turned toward the rolling prairie that stretched away for miles and miles.

But for all of his dozing he yet was on the alert, as his eyes opened wide every few minutes and swept the horizon for any sign of danger.

It was at such a minute that his gaze had fallen upon the form of a horseman far out upon the prairie.

He at once became wide awake, and fixed his gaze upon the one thus discovered. The individual came on over a prairie rise, and, discovering the group of two-score horses picketed out around the timber, had come to a halt and was calmly surveying the scene.

The Rangers were in a dangerous locality, for they were not far from the Rio Grande line, beyond which dwelt their implacable foes, the Raiders of Mexico.

Then the Comanches were always an enemy, and at that time several large bands of them were on the war-path, and the Rangers had been hunting them down for days; hence it was necessary to be on the alert.

The strange horseman might be a friend, and yet, why should one man be alone in that perilous country, where death threatened upon all sides? Strange!

He looked like a white man, at the distance seen, yet might be a renegade, with a band of Indians at his back.

Then, too, there was a possibility that he was one of "Rafael's Raiders," a Mexican band of outlaws who were constantly crossing the Rio Grande and raiding upon the Texans.

The alarm was given in a clear voice, that reached every sleeper's ear:

"Ho, Rangers! A foe is near!"

The men were on their feet in an instant, and every man at once moved toward his horse.

There they halted, for the approaching rider made no hostile demonstration, but came slowly on toward the camp.

"He's white," said one.

"Yes; some settler."

"No Mexican about him."

"He's surely alone."

Such were the comments, and all eyes watched the stranger as he came on, his horse at a provokingly slow walk.

The Rangers were a superb-looking set of men, with no regular uniform, unless their leggings of leather, huge spurs, hunting-coats and broad sombreros might be called such.

Their arms were of the best patterns, repeating rifle, a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife for each man, while their horses were superior animals, well equipped with Texas saddles and bridles.

Fearless, resolute faces abounded, with here and there a fun-loving and an utterly reckless countenance among them.

The captain of this Ranger band was a tall, good-looking man of forty, with an iron-gray beard and long hair, a face both stern and kind, for there was both austerity and sadness strangely blended in his features.

Upon the hat of each Ranger was a silver, five-point star, and the only insignia of rank that the captain wore was that his star was of gold.

Men to dare and to do they were, and their fame was well known throughout the Southwest, while they were feared by their foes as a band that knew no fear—feared no foe.

As the strange horseman approached, all gazed fixedly at him, and many comments were made as to his appearance.

His pony was undersized and anything but a beauty, while his rider, long-legged in the extreme, wore his stirrups short to hold his feet at a safe distance from the ground.

His dress was buckskin leggings, moccasins, a red woolen shirt, a slouch hat, much the worse for wear, and a blue blanket army overcoat, slung across the back of his saddle.

His arms consisted of a long rifle, of an old pattern known as the "Kentucky," two rough-looking revolvers, and a knife of most antiquated manufacture.

A faded Mexican serape was behind his saddle, a pair of saddle-bags across it, and the equipments were by no means the best, though serviceable.

A lariat, well made and very long, and a huge, vicious-looking dog—a cross between a

Cuban bloodhound and a St. Bernard he looked completed the outfit of the stranger.

But the man?

Ah! but he was not a man, excepting in size, but a tall, slender youth of eighteen, with long arms, broad shoulders, massive chest, and the making of a giant in his build. His face was beardless, fearless, determined, and withal reckless, while it was by no means unattractive. His hair, of chestnut hue, was long, falling below his shoulders, his teeth white and even, and his eyes piercing and seeming to take in at a glance all that they were turned upon.

Some of the younger members of the Rangers laughed at the strange youth and his outfit, but paying no heed to them, he drew rein near to the captain of the band and asked in a voice that was terse and decided:

"Is this the camp of the Rio Grande Rangers?"

"Yes."

"Are you Captain McNally?"

"I am, my boy."

"I've come to volunteer as a Ranger," was the announcement; and with that, the stranger dismounted amid a wild shout of laughter.

CHAPTER II.

MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

CAPTAIN PETER MCNALLY, as I have said, had a kindly face, and he felt for the youth, whom some of his men seemed to wish to make a butt of ridicule.

He saw in the stranger a tall, somewhat awkward youth, old-fashioned in appearance, arms and outfit, but nothing to laugh at, and turning to his men, he sternly said:

"Silence! I will have none of this."

Instantly silence followed, and then the stranger spoke, as he glanced over the party, taking in those who had been the rude ones:

"Oh, let the idiots laugh, captain, but I've heard my uncle say that 'He laughs best that laughs last,' and maybe if they've got the pluck to face me, they'll find I'm not such a fool as I look."

The Rangers looked at each other in amazement, for the words were quietly spoken, in a good-humored way, yet accompanied with a certain air and look that gave a plucky ring to them.

One young hot-head at once took exceptions to the stranger's challenge, forgetting that his rudeness had warranted it, and he stepped forward and said savagely:

"If you were a man I would thrash you for your impudence."

"I'm a man in size, if not in years, and if you wish to whip me just begin now, for I'm willing to take any licking you can give me, or meet you any way you wish, with knife, revolver or rifle."

Here was a bold defiance, and thrown in the teeth of Sol Bradford, the strongest man in the band, and a terror at a rough-and-tumble, or knock-down fight, for he stood six feet one and weighed two hundred pounds.

As he spoke, the youth stepped up and confronted him, and it was seen that he was a match for Sol Bradford, in height, at least.

All eyes glanced at Sol, then at the youth, and last at Captain McNally.

The latter saw that he was expected to speak, so said in his quiet way:

"Bradford, you were rude in the first place, then took up the words of this young man, so if he is willing to face you in a square, stand-up fight, for I shall allow no weapons, all right; but I warn him beforehand, that he has to meet our best man as far as strength goes."

"When I'm insulted, I don't weigh odds," was the youth's calm reply, and he placed his rifle against a tree, took off his belt of arms and then said:

"I'm a stranger here, captain, and have no friends, so I trust you'll see I'm treated square, as I have stripped off my weapons."

"You shall be dealt squarely with, my brave youth, the word of Peter McNally for it," was the reply, and the Rangers gave a "bravo" to mark their approval.

In the coolest kind of a way the young stranger rolled up his sleeves, revealing two muscular arms, and prepared for the fray, while he said, with a good-natured smile:

"I thought to join yer band to fight with you against the Greasers and Injuns, and I hopes I haven't got to lick you all before you make my acquaintance."

A shout of laughter followed these words, in which Sol Bradford joined, for he was a good-hearted fellow, though a little inclined to bullying, knowing his great strength.

"I'm ready, pard, and if you lick me, or not,

I'll be your friend for the game you show in trying."

As he spoke, Sol Bradford advanced upon the stranger with a rush.

To the amazement of all, and particularly to his own, he was sent flying backward from a blow that would have felled an ox.

Instantly he arose however, and, cautious now, began to spar.

This did not seem to suit the youth, however, who broke down his guard, rushed in on him, seized him in his strong arms and bent him backward to the ground, while he said quietly:

"Call it quits now, man, and don't make me have to hurt yer."

"I'll do it, and admit that you are the strongest thing in the shape of man that I ever tackled. I'm whipped, pard, and admit it. Here's my hand in friendship, Pard Stranger, and I'll be on hand if you need me."

A shout greeted these words of Bradford, and the Rangers all pressed around and grasped the hand of the youth, for they were a manly lot, and Captain McNally said:

"You laugh best, after all, my friend, as you laugh last. But who are you, may I ask?"

"I'm a young greenhorn Texan, who knows little more than herding, riding and shooting, with a little experience at Injun trailing. My father was killed in the Confederate Army, and my uncle took me to his ranch to live with him; but I thought I'd like to look about a little, so came to join your Rangers, if you'd have me," and he looked smilingly over the crowd.

"I guess we will have you; but may I ask your name?"

"My name, which my poor dead mother and father gave me is William Levi Taylor, but my uncle called me Wild Will, and the cowboys named me Buck Taylor, on account of there being no bucking horse I wouldn't ride. But, call me to suit yourselves," was the indifferent reply.

"Rangers, permit me to present to you all, excepting Sol Bradford who has before met him Mr. Buck Taylor, our new brother, and bid him, welcome into our mystic band," said Captain McNally.

Laughter greeted the words of the captain in his hit at Bradford, and the latter, stepping forward, called out:

"Three cheers, Rangers, for my old acquaintance, Buck Taylor!"

They were given with a will, and thus did Buck Taylor, the hero of my story, become a Texan Ranger.

CHAPTER III.

SCOUTING FOR AN OUTFIT.

THE coming of Buck Taylor into the band of Rangers created no little excitement among them, and they readily took to the good-natured young giant.

The day after his arrival some of them suggested a shooting tournament with rifle and revolver, and Buck in his quiet way, with his old-fashioned rifle, and pistols that had seen hard usage, found himself the best shot of all, to their utter amazement, for there were a number of most expert marksmen in the dashing little company.

Buck having said that he had won his name from riding bucking bronchos, there was an animal in camp that all were anxious to have him ride, especially the master of the vicious brute, who was then lame from his last struggle with his untamable steed.

Buck volunteered at once to try and ride him, and when the Rangers saw the youth mount the wild devil of a horse, they soon came to the conclusion that he had won his name from deserving it.

The horse bounded into the air, and kept up a terrific series of leaps, squatting, plunging, shying and vicious biting at his rider, until he was utterly worn out and conquered, the horseman meanwhile seeming to care but little for the mad antics.

Captain McNally had witnessed Buck's triumphs with the deepest interest, and said to the young volunteer:

"Buck, when you are properly armed and mounted, you will be about the best man I've got, and that is saying a great deal, for my men are said to be the wildest riders and deadliest shots on the Texas prairies."

"But that sheep you ride won't do for you, nor your antiquated weapons."

"I know that, sir; but then I had no better, and thought I could capture what I needed."

"Well said; but you ought to be a good lariat-thrower?"

"I am, sir."

"Did you ever catch a wild horse?"

"Many a one, sir."

"Well, there is a large herd of wild horses in the river valley above here, and the king of the drove is a roan stallion."

"I've heard of him, Captain McNally, and they say there is no horse on the plains that can catch him."

"Well, Buck, I can answer, for one, for my own horses here, and not one of them can run with the roan, and they are considered the best for speed in these parts; but you can get a good horse out of the herd, not to speak of the roan, and I will lend you any one of my animals to ride on the hunt that you wish."

"No, sir; I'll take my little broncho; for it will be by a trick, not speed, that I'll catch a good horse, and I'll try for the roan."

"Luck to you, then, Buck, and somehow I feel you will have it. When will you start?"

"Right off, sir."

"By the way, Buck, where did you get that tigerish-looking dog?"

"Vermifuge, sir?"

"What do you call him?"

"Vermifuge."

The captain laughed and asked:

"How came you to give him that name?"

"He belonged to a settler on the river, sir, and the poor man was killed by the Indians, and I found his body, so went to tell his wife. She had gone out on a hunt for her husband, and left the dog, then a puppy, to guard the baby."

"I found him guarding the little 'un still, but so awful sick I thought he was mad. There was a bottle on the floor, empty, and it was marked, 'Vermifuge,' and the puppy had sucked down its contents; so I gave him the name that was on the label."

"And the baby?"

"Oh, the kid was all right, but its poor mother never got back, for the red devils killed her, too. I took the baby to another settler, who adopted it, while I adopted the dog, and there's none better, captain."

"He looks it; but I'd rather be attacked by a panther than by Vermifuge, as you call him."

"But some one said your horse was named Snakeroot?"

"True, captain, I called him that because he likes the root, and eats it when he can get it. They are a strange pair, captain, Vermifuge and Snakeroot."

"Yes," assented the captain, who thought he might also very properly add:

"A strange trio"—the tall, daring youth, his dog and his broncho.

Buck Taylor now mounted Snakeroot, and, with Vermifuge trotting at his heels, rode out of camp alone, for he declined help from the Rangers who offered to accompany him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE COMANCHES.

In the days of which I write herds of wild horses were quite frequently seen in Texas, and many a fine animal was often found among the equine rangers of the plains.

To catch a wild horse was no easy matter, and often a herd contained many speedy animals that defied capture by man.

There were a few bold wild-horse hunters among the Texans, and they had won fame by their daring and skill in their line.

There were also skilled horse-hunters among the Comanches, and it was no infrequent occurrence for the bands of white and red-skins to meet in the broncho feeding-grounds and there have a fight for mastery, the victors generally capturing the animals taken by the others.

With the Comanches on the war-path, as they had been for months in considerable force, at the time of which I write, the wild steeds of the prairies had obtained quite a respite from pursuit.

The herd to which the roan stallion, of which the reader has heard, was known to belong was a vast one, and its grazing-grounds extended over a large area of country, then a half-way land between the Indians and the whites.

But boldly into this disputed territory Buck Taylor made his way, after leaving the camp of the Rangers.

He was utterly fearless, and raised upon the frontier, he had become as thorough as an Indian in trailing, and was versed in all signs and cunning of the border.

His uncle had hoped to keep him upon his large ranch, for Buck soon became noted as the best one of the cowboy herders; but the youth was anxious to get beyond the circle of a ranch herd of cattle, and so had started out to seek his fortune alone in the world, with his little broncho, his dog, his old-fashioned weapons and a few dollars in his pocket.

But, added to his personal property as a basis of fortune, Buck had good, sound "horse sense," a superb physique, giant strength, prairie knowledge and utter fearlessness.

It was this utter disregard of danger that caused him to set forth alone to secure a suitable mount and weapons as a Ranger.

He could have bought what he needed, but he preferred to show the Rangers that he could secure them in another way.

So he entered the disputed ground, and went in search of the herd of wild horses, of which the roan stallion was king.

He sighted the herd the next day, feeding in a vast valley, and noted the way that they were moving.

"They are feeding down the valley, and will rest to-night in the timber yonder.

"I must flank them."

So he said, and he mounted Snakeroot and set off at a canter for a long ride around to head the herd off in the timber.

One seeing the size of Snakeroot, and of his rider, would be surprised at the way in which he held on his course so untiringly.

But though small, Snakeroot was a speedy little animal, full of wonderful endurance.

Upon reaching the timber, Buck sought out a secluded canyon, and then staked out his horse, and left his dog, with the extras of his outfit which he did not care to take along in his reconnoissance.

He also left his rifle, but took his lariat, and went up through the timber until he reached a small river.

Under the bank of this he held on his way, going toward a point above where he knew there was a crossing, and where the horses would certainly cross that night or in the morning.

Suddenly he started, for he saw, in a little cavity in the bank, something that showed he was not alone in that vicinity.

What he saw was a ravine, or water-wash in the bank, running back some sixty feet.

In this were three Indian ponies, some lances, and a few other articles, which showed it to be a red-skin camp.

"Whence are the reds?" muttered Buck, coolly. Creeping into the ravine, revolver in hand, he inspected the surroundings and the outfit.

He saw that it was but a temporary camp, and as he noted the lances and rifles of the redskins, he at once read the reason why they were there.

"The reds are here for just what I am, and they are up in the timber hiding, to catch the horses to-night when they come to the ford."

"This is just pie for me."

Crawling up to the top of the ravine, he took a careful survey of the timber.

No one was near, and the timber was quite open.

Running his eyes along the river bank, he discovered a moving form, nearly a quarter of a mile away.

It was a red-skin.

Watching him, Buck saw that he was signaling to some one who was evidently in a tree above him.

"Aha!" muttered the young Ranger. This expression meant a great deal, as his after musing aloud proved.

"They want the roan stallion, and are plotting to catch him right there at the ford! I reckon I'll let them catch him; but I'll find out just what their little game is."

Then Buck took a look at the three Indian ponies.

They were all exceedingly fine animals, and the outfit of one showed that it belonged to a chief.

There were one rifle and two muskets among the weapons, and a buckskin bag of provisions.

"They'll get their trap set, and then come back here to supper, knowing that the herd will not reach the timber before dark, but feed on the prairie, so I guess I'd better cross over and examine their little outfit while they are here at supper."

So saying, he carefully covered any trail he had made, and going back the way he had come, soon reached his horse and dog.

Mounting, he rode down to the river, and in an instant Snakeroot was swimming across, while Vermifuge followed in his wake.

Reaching the other shore, Buck made a wide circuit to reach a rise of prairie, and then cantered rapidly along under its shelter for a mile or more, until he came to a small creek flowing into the larger stream or river.

The bushes growing along the creek sheltered him and he reached the river bank, which on this shore was overgrown with brushwood.

Leaving his horse in a good hiding-place, Buck called to Vermifuge to accompany him, and taking his rifle, crept along until he reached a spot near the ford.

Peering cautiously out from among the bushes he saw upon the other shore, not sixty yards away those whom he sought.

He also discovered just what they were about.

"There are three of 'em, and they're Comanches. It's a snug little game they are playing, and I'll try and get the good of it," and, after watching them for a few moments, Buck retraced his way toward his horse.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK'S STRATEGY.

Once more mounted, Buck started back on the very trail he had come.

Reaching the river, he again swam Snakeroot across, and soon had the little animal staked out to feed in the canyon, relieved of his saddle and bridle. Then, accompanied by Vermifuge, the young Ranger started along the river-bank on the trail he had taken several hours before.

The sun was setting as he came to the vicinity of the temporary camp of Comanches, and he moved very cautiously; but, examining his own trail carefully, he saw that it had not been discovered, and soon he peered up into the ravine.

There were the horses, and the weapons of the Indians; but Buck saw that they had been there as he supposed they would be, and had supper.

A fire had been built, but put out, the ashes being yet wet.

"The reds had a good supper, and have now gone back to lay for the herd. It was a clever trick of theirs that I saw from across the river, to pile up brush on each side of the trail leading to the ford, and thus force the herd to pass under the trees where they will be, and drop lariats down upon them.

"Well, I only hope they'll catch the roan, for I want him!"

So saying Buck started off on his way down the river, Vermifuge trotting close to his heels.

As he drew near the ford he heard the thunder of hundreds of approaching hoofs, and knew that the herd of wild horses were coming.

Knowing that the red-skinned, now hiding in the trees over the ford trail, would be watching the herd, he went forward, little fearing to be seen, and soon came in sight of the full situation.

What the Comanches had been working on, when he saw them from across the river, they had accomplished, which was to make a line of brush from the descent to the river, on each side for quite a distance, which would cause the herd to go more slowly there, holding a number of horses together in a mass beneath some trees, in the branches of which the red-skins were seated, each with several lariats, firmly fastened at one end, and with the other coiled in hand ready to throw.

The brush wall also served as a screen for the daring Buck, and he crept up to a position not fifty yards from the Comanches in the trees.

The red-skins' eyes were now on the approaching wild horses, and they little dreamed that Buck Taylor's eyes were upon them.

The twilight was just beginning to fall, there being yet plenty of light, and Buck Taylor could see that the herd was a vast one, while he rejoiced to see in the lead a superb specimen of horseflesh in the shape of a large roan.

He was a number of lengths in advance of the herd, and came on with head erect and nostrils extended, a splendid equine king.

His mane was long, his tail, which was held up, was of great length and thickness, and the animal was indeed a beautiful creature.

He seemed to scent danger ahead, and snorted like a locomotive.

But the ford was before him, and there the herd were to get water, after which they were to continue on to the prairie, or remain in the shelter of the timber for the night.

Behind the roan came other fine animals, though not his equal in appearance, and all held their heads erect as they advanced toward the river.

Nearer and nearer they came, and the Indians, crouching in the trees, held their lariats ready for the wild animals, while Buck Taylor held his rifle ready for the red-skins.

Nearer and nearer, until the roan stallion halted beneath the trees, and above him were his red foes.

Then an instant of suspense, and two lariat loops settled above the head of the noble brute.

At the same instant another lariat settled over the head of a beautiful gray mare, with white mane and tail.

Other lariats were then quickly thrown, but

they fell short, for the herd, alarmed by the wild snort and bounds of the roan king, wheeled quickly and darted away like the wind.

The roan and the white mare, however, could not fly, for both had been dragged to earth by the lariats, the first with two over his neck, which kept him midway between two trees.

The red-skins uttered shouts of triumph and started to descend from their perch, when, suddenly, another wild shout was heard.

It came from the lips of Buck Taylor, and it was followed by a rifle-shot.

Following the shot came a wild death-cry and a fall, as the Comanche chief fell from the limb to the ground, right under the hoofs of the stallion.

One of the other red-skins sprung to the ground from his lofty height, to fly, but he fell heavily and remained where he had fallen, half stunned, while his comrade quickly managed to slide down and attempted to kill the daring young Ranger with an arrow from his ready bow.

It was well intended, but missed the body and sunk in the arm to the bone.

Tearing the arrow from his arm Buck Taylor ran upon the Comanche, firing his revolver as he advanced.

His aim was true and the Comanche fell with a bullet in his brain.

In the mean time, the two captured horses had ceased their struggles for the lariats had choked them down.

Springing to the side of the roan, Buck Taylor hopped him with wonderful quickness and agility, after which he slipped the lariat over his head in the shape of a halter.

Then he sprung quickly to the mare and hopped her, also making a headstall for her.

It was but the work of a few minutes, and he was congratulating himself upon his grand success, for both horses were now reviving from their choking, when an arrow suddenly whizzed by his head, grazing his ear.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RANGER'S LUCK.

WHEN the arrow first whizzed by Buck Taylor's head, his first thought was that there were other red-skins about than those he had seen, and who had been pursuing the herd; but a glance, as he sprung to cover showed him that it was one of the trio, he who had risked a jump from the tree.

He saw that the Indian was lying upon the ground, and had fired the arrow at him, but had no other, for he clutched the bow in one hand and his knife in the other.

Buck was always merciful, for no brave man should be otherwise. The red-skin was in his power, and so he advanced boldly toward him, at the same time replacing his revolver in his belt.

He had learned to speak the Comanche tongue pretty well, while a cowboy, and so in fact he had, when a boy of twelve, been a captive of the Comanche tribe for some months, so he said in the tongue of the Indian:

"Comanche brave is in a bad fix."

The Indian nodded.

"Much hurt?"

The red-skin pointed to his leg and answered:

"Leg broken."

"Ah! that is very bad."

"Why don't pale-face brave kill Mad Wolf?"

"I never hit a fellow when he's down, pard," replied Buck in English, and then he added in the Comanche tongue.

"I would not kill a wounded foe. Come, let me see about your leg."

The red-skin was suspicious, and certainly expected to die; but Buck Taylor bent over him and examined his leg.

It was broken, just above the knee, and a bad fracture.

"Where are your people?" he asked.

"Far away."

"I don't believe you, but I'll let you go."

The red-skin looked surprised, while the horses were now struggling to rise, having recovered from their severe choking by the lariats.

Buck watched them a minute, to see that they could not get loose, and then he said:

"I'll fix your leg as best I can, Comanche, and in the morning you can have your horse and go back to your people, for I'll be ready to light out by that time."

With real humanity in his heart he first looked to the comfort of the red-skin, setting his leg as best he could, and binding it around with strips cut from the costume of the other Comanches, and bracing it with bark splints which he cut with his knife for the purpose.

It was a painful operation, to say the least;

but the red-skin did not utter a groan when finished.

Buck raised him in his strong arms, and started for the red-skin camp.

His great strength did not give out, and he reached the camp and placed the red-skin in a comfortable position, saying, when all was done:

"Now, red-skin, I must see that you'll be here when I get back; so will leave a guard over you. Watch him, dog!"

Vermifuge squatted near the red-skin, and Buck started at a brisk walk back for the captive horses.

The moon had risen, and being at its full, made all as bright as day, almost, and he saw the horses were where he had left them.

He had hopped them with slip-knots, and so that they could not hurt themselves; and feeling their efforts to rise fruitless, they lay sullen and quiet.

"I must get rid of these fellows first," and he pointed to the two dead red-skins; "so here goes!" and with a skill that showed it was not his first experience in the work, he scalped the two braves, while he confessed to himself:

"I always think this is brutal, but then an Indian is never dead until he is scalped. Then aloud: "And now to bury 'em!"

He dragged the bodies to the soft earth under the river-bank, and quickly dug a shallow grave, into which he rolled the hapless dead. Over the grave he threw piles of brush and stone, to keep the wolves away. Then he once more approached the roan stallion.

"Guess I'll give you a try first," he muttered.

Quick as a flash he removed the hopples and sprung upon the back of the startled king of the herd.

With a wild snort and a bound the roan was upon his feet, and shot away like an arrow from a bow.

He headed straight out of the timber, reached the prairie, and sped along like the wind.

"This horse fairly flies! Oh, he's the horse for me!" cried the exultant rider. Letting him run for half a mile, Buck began to draw upon the stallion.

The horse took it furiously, and the struggle began between man and beast.

With wild snorts of rage, plunging, leaping, squatting, bucking, and biting at the leather leggings of his rider, the wild roan sought to throw him, or tear him from his back; but the young Ranger had won the name of "Fuck" from just such splendid riding as was then demanded, and he kept his seat while he constantly endeavored to show the maddened brute that he was his master.

Another run, another stop, and the same tactics were gone through, until at last, even the king of the prairies was compelled to yield to the superior will of the man.

And when he did yield, he did it gracefully, and was turned back by his rider and taken to the timber.

Coming near the gray mare, he once more broke forth with fury, to try and show that he was still untamed; but the attempt was fruitless, for he was again forced to yield.

Going up to where he had left his own horse, he led the animal to the Indian camp, the prairie king once more trying to "show off" when he beheld Snakeroot, but with the result of his last attempt—to be completely subdued.

Leaving both horses in the canyon, and again hopping the stallion, Buck started after the gray mare.

She glared viciously at him, for, having seen her lord a captive and slave, she knew what was coming.

A moment more and her feet were freed from the hopples, and the horsebreaker was upon her back.

A few wild plunges she made, a neigh of anger, and then she became quiet.

"Ah, my beauty, you have been ridden before. You have escaped from some one and joined the herd; but you're a fine one and no mistake," and her captor turned the head of the now obedient animal toward his camp, or rather the camp of the red-skins.

The mare certainly had been ridden before, and was not born wild on the prairies, for she was remarkably obedient, though full of spirit and evidently enraged at her capture and mastery.

Again at the camp, Buck staked the mare out in the canyon with his own and the Indians' horses, and left the roan king still in shackles.

"The king will give me another tussle in the morning, for he is not yet certain I'm boss," was Buck's conclusion.

The Comanche still lay where Buck had left him, Vermifuge still on guard.

Building a fire, the young Ranger soon cooked supper getting a liberal supply for his prisoner, and the dog as well.

The Comanche ate his supper with relish, though he was without doubt suffering greatly with his broken leg; and as he ate, Buck talked.

"If I take you with me, the boys will quickly end your life, and as you are in hard luck with a broken leg, I don't wish that."

"Then you have to mourn for your two friends and the loss of the roan king, and altogether you're not happy; so I'll let you go, as I promised."

Taking more time after supper to re-dress the Comanche's leg, Buck made him a bed, fixed him as comfortably as possible, and then spread his own blankets.

"Now, Vermifuge, it's your place to watch, for I've had a hard day of it; so go up yonder on the bank and plant yourself."

The intelligent dog at once obeyed, while the young Ranger returned to his blankets and was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

CAUSE FOR ALARM.

THE Ranger had been asleep perhaps an hour, when he was awakened by a touch.

Buck, like all men whose lives are in danger day and night, awoke instantly.

He saw that it was Vermifuge that had awakened him, and he at once arose, while the dog ran back to his post.

Buck quickly followed the intelligent brute up the bank, and he at once discovered that there was cause for alarm.

There, riding slowly along through the timber, and now and then in open spaces where the moonlight fell full upon them, were a number of horsemen.

"Injuns," said Buck, laconically.

The dog glanced up at him with a look that plainly said:

"I told you so."

They were not three hundred feet away, and riding along the trail toward the ford.

Buck counted them.

There were twenty-seven.

"Just twenty-seven more Injuns than I want to see," he muttered.

He knew full well his danger.

His dog he could trust, but the neighing of one of the horses in the canyon, at the presence of the others, would betray him.

Then, too, if the Comanche suspected that his friends were near, he might give a cry for them to come to his aid.

So Buck crouched there on the top of the bank and waited.

He could almost feel his heart beat, for if discovered, though he might escape, he might lose his horses, and to give up the roan king would be a terrible blow to him.

So he was very anxious and gave a deep sigh of relief when he saw the horsemen disappear like shadows in the distance.

Listening he heard their horses splashing in the water, when they rode in to give them a drink, and he feared that they might go into camp there, so he set out on foot to discover.

But he soon found that they had ridden on, and feeling greatly relieved he went back to his camp.

He saw that the Comanche was awake, and his manner showed that he knew something had happened.

As Buck did not speak, the Indian said:

"Mad Wolf hear many braves go by, and splash in river."

"Thought he would call and braves come to Mad Wolf and kill white man."

"It's lucky for you, you didn't call, for if those soldiers had come here they would have hanged you."

"I didn't want you hanged, so I kept quiet," said Buck.

The Indian was taken aback, for he supposed he was wrong, and that the horsemen were soldiers.

After a moment he said:

"My white brother good man."

Buck laughed, and leaving Vermifuge on guard once more returned to his blankets.

"No watch?" said Mad Wolf.

"My dog is on guard."

The Indian gave a grunt and said no more.

It was very evident that he did not like the dog.

The young Ranger awoke at dawn, went upon the bank and took a close survey of the surroundings, and then returned and built a fire to cook breakfast.

While the fire was burning good, he took the hopples off of roan king and again sprung upon his back.

At once the fight began over again for mastery.

But again the human mastered the brute, and Buck then lariated the horse out to feed upon the rich grass in the canyon.

But the roan king was sullen, his proud spirit was hurt, and he would not eat.

"You'll soon come to it, my fine fellow," said Buck, and he soon had breakfast ready and liberally supplied the red-skin, whose broken leg he arranged once more as best he could.

Then he set to work to start on his way back to join the Rangers, whom he expected to find at a camp where they often made a halt of weeks at a time, and where Captain McNally told the young recruit he would find them.

Having gotten all in readiness he asked Mad Wolf which was his horse, among the three animals that had been left there by the Comanches.

Mad Wolf, being an Indian, picked out the best of the three animals, though all were good.

It was the chief's horse, and the trappings near each pony showed to which one it belonged.

"That is the chief's horse, Mad Wolf, for I know the outfit of a chief," quietly said Buck.

Then he added:

"My red brother is mistaken."

The Indian squinted his eyes, as though to get a better look, and then pointed out another of the ponies as his, while he said:

"Yes, me no see right; that my pony."

"A dollar to a cent you are wrong again, red-skin; but you can have him," said Buck, who knew the Indian character pretty well.

He then led the horse up, saddled and ready, and taking the red-skin in his strong arms placed him on his back, arranging him as comfortably as possible.

Then the Ranger got the other two Indian ponies together and fastened the gray mare between them, while he made of Snakeroot a pack-horse for his own and the traps of the dead red-skins.

Mounting the roan king upon which he placed his saddle and bridle, he had another short battle with him; but when the wild steed was made to feel the severe Mexican bit and spurs, he became as docile as a lamb and obeyed the will of his master without further struggle against the inevitable.

After leaving the timber Buck turned to his prisoner and said:

"Now, Mad Wolf, you can go your way, and I suppose you will scalp some white woman or child as soon as your leg gets well, in return for my letting you go.

"But you can reach your people before night, and I have tied some food there to your saddle, so you won't starve if it takes you longer.

"Here are your weapons; and I'll say goodbye, but not luck to you, by any means."

The red-skin did not understand all that was said, but seemed glad to get free, and held out his hand, while he answered:

"White brother has good heart, and is great chief. Mad Wolf will not forget him."

The young Texan grasped his hand and the two parted, the red-skin going off to the left alone, and Buck, leading his horses, riding on his way toward the camp of the Rangers of the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

WITH seventy odd miles between him and the Rangers' camp, and the way overrun with red-skins, or infested with Mexican raiders, Buck Taylor could well appreciate the danger of his position.

Mounted upon the roan king, and alone, Buck Taylor need have dreaded no foe.

But he was anxious to carry back with him the two Indian horses he had captured, the gray mare and Snakeroot, the latter bearing the weapons of the Comanches and all the traps.

"I guess we'll get there, Vermifuge; but we'll make a big fight if we don't," he said, and the dog seemed to be of the same opinion as his master.

It was toward noon when the young Ranger halted for a rest and dinner.

Roan king, with the example of the other horses, seemed to have decided to behave himself, and he not only drank when Buck rode him into a small stream, but ate grass with a great relish when he was staked out to feed.

Buck liked a good square meal.

He had not yet stopped growing, though six feet two in height, and he knew that it took a great deal to sustain his system, and consequently he lived well when he could.

So he got a good dinner, out of his own haversack, and the provision-bags of the red-skins, and shared it with his dog.

Then he rested for half an hour, and once more resumed his way.

The roan king of course objected to the saddle and bridle again, but saw that resistance was useless and soon yielded, though in a sullen way.

Hardly had the Ranger started once more, when Vermifuge suddenly shot off like an arrow from a bow, to the top of a rise in the prairie.

"What is it, good dog?" said Buck, as Vermifuge came back, his tail between his legs.

"That means you seen something to scare you."

"Well, if it scares you, it will me, and I'll get as far from that rise as I can."

So saying Buck urged his horses forward at a quicker pace, bearing off the while from the rise of land on his right.

He had gone but a short distance when suddenly over the rise appeared a human head.

Then came another and another.

They were bedecked with feathers, and were Comanches.

They had not expected to see any foe there, it was very certain, and they halted quickly.

Then they gesticulated wildly, others appeared, and with a wild shout in chorus they started toward the Ranger.

Buck Taylor, meanwhile, had gone along at a brisk gallop, until he saw the Indians start in chase.

"Guess I'll give 'em a hint not to crowd me," he said, and he brought his long rifle up for use.

The roan king had never had a rifle fired from his back before, and he was very restive.

So the Ranger had to fire without a steady aim.

The aim was true enough, however, to bring down an Indian pony, and the rider was thrown heavily to the ground, while a yell of rage broke from his comrades.

Over the rise now came the Indians, and as they spread out in chase, Buck muttered:

"Twenty-seven of 'em."

"That's the band we saw last night, Vermifuge."

At the shot from his back the roan king seemed almost frightened out of his wits; but the heavy bit and sharp spurs brought him to a realization that they were worse than the report of a rifle, and he bounded away at a swift and steady run.

The gray mare also grew restive, but fast as she was, between the two Indian ponies, she was compelled to obey.

These three the Ranger was leading by a lariat, attached to the gray mare, while Snakeroot followed behind at will, for he was not led, and the dog ran on ahead to lead the way.

As they sped along the Ranger was glad to see that his horses held their own well with the animals of his pursuers, and the roan king and the captive mare showed by their going that they could readily increase their pace to a much faster one.

With no load upon them, Buck felt no uneasiness as to his ability to keep ahead of the red-skins, and he only hoped the roan king would prove as good a horse as he was said to be, by the hundreds who had attempted to catch him.

So the chase continued for several miles, and, without pressing his animals harder, Buck Taylor managed to keep out of range of the Indians.

It was no easy task to load that long rifle on the back of a wild horse; but Buck managed it, and turning in his saddle again sent a bullet flying back at his pursuers.

He saw that he had hit a red-skin, by his actions, and the movements of those about him; but the wounded man still kept his seat on his pony, so could not have been badly hurt.

Afar in the rear came a pony bearing a double load, for he carried the red rider of the horse Buck had killed, riding behind his master.

The Comanches did all in their power to overtake the fugitive, and lashed their ponies unmercifully to urge them on.

They also kept up a running fire, both of musketry and arrows, for half of the band were armed with the former weapon, in addition to their bows and arrows.

And so the fight continued, the Ranger holding his own, and the Comanches pressing him hard, until at last, as he neared a clump of timber upon a ridge, Buck drew rein.

He had again loaded his rifle, and seeing shelter near, determined to risk another shot, and at closer quarters, for the musket-balls of the red-skins barely reached him.

His horses seemed getting fagged, even the

roan king showing fatigue under the weight he carried, and to which he had never been accustomed.

Vermifuge held on well, running still with ease, but the pace kept up for the past two hours had begun to tell also upon him.

"I will give them a hint not to crowd me," said Buck, and drawing rein, he sprung to the ground, as he reined his horses up to a standstill, and throwing his rifle to his shoulder, took a quick aim.

But the Indians saw his act, and quickly tried to dodge the bullet by throwing themselves flat on their horses.

But the rifle flashed, and a yell told the result, even had not the red-skin fallen from his pony to the ground.

Buck Taylor echoed the yell with a defiant war-cry, and leaping upon the roan king, started once more in flight, just as out of the timber ahead dashed a band of horsemen directly toward him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TWO MEXICANS.

THE party who dashed out of the timber at once caused a change in the situation of affairs.

There were fifteen of them, and the Indians quickly came to a halt, and then those in the lead began to fall back rapidly upon their comrades, who were stretched for half a mile over the prairie, the pony with the double mount coming on far in the rear.

The dead body of the warrior dropped from his saddle by Buck Taylor the band carried off along with his horse, which one of the braves lassoed as he was running away after his rider fell from his back.

But Buck was by no means pleased at the turn affairs had taken.

He preferred the red-skins, from whom he felt his power to escape, to those who now dashed out of the timber.

At a glance he recognized them, for many a time had he seen them before, during his cowboy life upon the ranch.

They were Rafael's Raiders of the Rio Grande, as lawless a set of Mexicans as ever crossed the river to prey upon American territory.

They were fifteen in number, dressed in the picturesque *caballero* costume of their country, their horses were equipped with the heavy silver-bespangled saddles and bridles that have won such fame, and they were one and all armed to the teeth with repeating rifles and revolvers.

They were at peace with the red-skins on the other side of the Rio Grande, but upon American land they warred against all people.

They saw in the red-skins a splendidly mounted band, knew that they must have been on a raid, and therefore were well supplied with money and small articles of value, and would therefore be prizes well worth securing.

Their horses were comparatively fresh, while those of the red-skins were jaded, from their long run after the Ranger.

To surround and kill the red-skins then, was their intention, rob them, and then with their booty and horses to dash on to the river and re-cross into Mexican territory, for their raid had not been one of success on that trip.

Singling out two men the chief bade them to capture Buck Taylor, wishing to carry him back as a hostage, or to hang him, and he, with his remaining twelve men made a rush for the red-skins.

The two men detailed for the work of capturing the Ranger came riding rapidly toward him, their revolvers at a level.

They were dark-faced, villainous-looking men, and they looked just what they were—cut-throats and thieves.

Buck, in his cowboy life, had picked up considerable Spanish, as well as Comanche, and he saw but one chance to escape.

He knew that if he fired upon the two men, killing one, or both, the Mexicans riding upon the red-skins would at once charge down upon him and escape would be impossible.

So he took to strategy, and pretending to be glad of their coming, called out:

"Good-day, senors! I am glad you have come to save me!"

He made no demonstration that was hostile, and the two Mexicans dashed up, at the same time lowering their weapons.

"Who are you?" asked one, as they both drew rein near Buck.

"I am a poor settler, run away from my home by the red-skins," said Buck, in a doleful voice and in his best Spanish, or rather Mexican,

"I speak English better than you do Spanish,

so we'll talk in that language. "You are my prisoner," said one of the Mexicans, who did speak English with a very slight accent.

"I'm sorry, pard, for I am in hard luck," Buck remarked.

"You'll be in worse before we are done with you."

"Get down, Pedro, and tie him to his saddle."

The last was said in Spanish, and taking a lariat from his saddle-horn Pedro advanced to the side of Buck and began to tie his legs.

"Now out with your cash," said the other, and he held forth his hand.

Buck saw that the Raiders were over half a mile away, and were pouring in a hot fire upon the Indians, who were retreating slowly and also firing upon their foes.

Then was his chance, he thought.

So he said:

"I havn't got much money, pard, but I suppose you've got to have it."

He reached his hand to his pocket as he spoke, and, quick as the lightning's flash, he drew a revolver and dealt the Mexican a blow in the face with it that felled him from his horse.

Ere he could fall from his saddle Buck had brought the weapon down upon the head of the other who was tying his legs beneath his horse, and the man sunk in his tracks.

Without an instant of hesitation Buck dashed forward in flight, leading his horses as before, and with Vermifuge running by his side.

He had not cared to fire, fearing the sound might attract attention, and he had therefore used his heavy revolver as a club.

The Mexicans lay where they had fallen, one of them moving convulsively, the other lying motionless.

On went Buck, and he had gotten a couple of hundred yards away before his flight was discovered by those fighting the red-skins.

Then they realized that the two men sent to capture the Ranger had more than met their match, and four horsemen were at once dispatched in pursuit.

But Buck's horses had obtained a short rest, in the enforced halt, and he was already beyond the range of the repeating rifles, so he spurred forward at the greatest possible speed under the circumstances.

He reached the belt of timber, dashed through it, as he dared not make a stand, and sped out over the prairie beyond.

As the four Mexicans came in view, Buck closely watched them, and he said grimly:

"I'm steadily gaining, so I am all right."

It was true, for he was slowly gaining upon his pursuers.

Over a prairie rise he went, and then he wished to give a loud shout of joy, for, suddenly, he came in sight of a dozen horsemen riding toward him at a gallop.

They were the McNally Rangers, and they were going to discover the cause of the firing beyond the timber belt.

They recognized Buck at a glance and gave a shout, and Sol Bradford, who was leading the party, called out:

"Back again, Buck! glad to see you; but what's up over the hill?"

"I was chased by twenty-seven Comanches, and fifteen of Rafael's Raiders were in the timber belt and are now fighting the red-skins, excepting four who are after me."

"We'll give them a rub. Come, pard!" and away dashed the gallant Rangers, with a bravo for Buck, who had come to a halt, while all had seen that he really was mounted upon the great roan stallion.

But Buck was not one to be left out of a skirmish, and it did not take him a minute to unfasten the Mexican's lariat from his legs, dismount and stake his horses out, then mount and go after his brother Rangers.

CHAPTER X.

A THREE-CORNERED FIGHT.

As Buck started after his comrades, he saw the four Mexicans appear over the prairie rise.

Never did he see horses stopped in shorter time even in catching a wild horse, than those four men reined up their steeds in.

To turn, as upon pivots, and take to flight, when they beheld the Rangers, was a second's work, and a cheer rung out from the Texans at sight of their old foes, Rafael's Rangers.

Putting spurs to their horses the Mexicans fairly flew in their effort to escape, and dashing through the timber belt came out in view of the

fight between their companions and the Comanches.

Firing their revolvers, to attract the attention of their comrades, they sped along.

One of the two Mexicans whom Buck had dealt such a severe blow to, was upon his feet his horse by his side.

At sight of his four friends flying for their lives, he made efforts to mount in haste, but it was evident that he was suffering from the blow.

As, however, the four passed on, and he saw the Rangers dash out of the timber, he made a supreme effort, reached his saddle, and sent his horse away in rapid flight.

The Raider band that had been fighting the red-skins ceased fighting, and a horseman rode forward his hands held above his head.

One of the Indians rode forward to meet him, and a parley was going on between them when the five Mexicans dashed up, for the one Buck had knocked down had overtaken his companions.

Buck had, in the meanwhile, given the roan king a chance to try his speed, in trying to overtake the Rangers, and he fairly shouted with delight, as he beheld the splendid animal gaining on those in front at a pace that revealed his remarkable speed, for the splendid horse had certainly had a rough time of it the past twenty-four hours.

As they dashed out of the timber Buck was up with the group, and in his light way called out, as he saw one of the Mexicans mounting:

"There goes one of my Raider pards, now; but I guess the other will stay where he is."

This the other did, for he moved not as the Rangers thundered by.

"Sol, they are uniting against us," cried an old Ranger, as he saw the parley between the guerrilla chief and the Comanche chief.

"Right you are, Mack, so we must be careful.

"Ho, pard! come to a halt!"

The Rangers promptly obeyed, for they saw that the Comanches had indeed sided with the Raiders against a common foe.

A moment before fighting each other to the death; now, for their own safety, though still foes, they were as friends.

The wily Mexican chief had decided well, and his proposition had been quickly agreed to, to unite for mutual protection.

Half a dozen of the Comanches had fallen, under the fire of the repeating rifles of the Mexicans, and two of the latter had gone down before the muskets of the red-skins.

Having banded together and yet gazing fiercely at each other, they quickly formed a circle to protect themselves against the Rangers.

"Oh! if we only had Captain McNally and the rest of the boys, we could wipe 'em out," said Sol Bradford.

"Yes, but as we have not them here to help us, we've got to fall back to the timber," remarked Mack, the oldest Ranger of the party.

"How many did you say there were, Buck?" asked Sol.

"Fifteen Mexicans and twenty-seven Comanches; but I got one Comanche and one Raider, and since then others have been killed."

"I'll count 'em."

Then Buck turned his keen eyes upon the Indian and Mexican band and said:

"I count twelve mounted Mexicans and twenty-one Injuns."

"Thirty-three in all," said Mack.

"And we are thirteen, with Buck," said Sol.

"An unlucky number!" came almost in chorus from the superstitious ones of the band.

The words had effect, and the decision was to fall back to the timber.

"I should think we could lick three to one," said Buck.

"If we were all Buck Taylors we might," was the laughing reply of Sol Bradford.

"They've got some mighty fine horses, those Mexicans have, that we might capture," added Buck, holding this out as a bait, for his blood was up to fighting heat, and he believed the Rangers could get the best of a battle with the combined forces of Mexicans and Comanches.

"No, we will fall back to the timber, and there we can keep them at bay; but, Buck, you had better go after your stock and fetch them to the timber, for the reds will flank us and run them off," said Sol Bradford.

"That's so; but how far is it to the camp of the boys?"

"Thirty miles."

"Too far to go after reinforcements!"

"Oh! yes, for those reds and Greasers will both skip when night comes on."

"They are too near this end of the disputed ground."

So back to the timber on the hill the Rangers started, their faces flushing under the jeers of the Mexicans and triumphant cries of the Comanches.

But their foes at once began to advance, and it was very evident that Captain Rafael felt his opportunity had arrived to strike a severe blow upon the Rangers by their capture or death.

He was seen riding with the Comanche chief, and soon after the red-skins separated from the Mexicans, and dividing in two parties moved off to surround the timber.

They left their dead and wounded in a little group upon the prairies, and the Mexicans did the same, while they advanced slowly towards the position of the Rangers.

Buck had already left the party to go and fetch his horses to the timber, as Sol Bradford had suggested, but the quick movement of the Indians in surrounding the Rangers' position prevented his getting back in time.

He was not one to advance without extreme caution, and he saw that the Indians were between him and the timber, and, as he peered over the rise of prairie he felt sure that they did not know of his having left the Rangers.

"Maybe I can do some good by this," he muttered, and he stepped back to where his horses were, Vermifuge watching them and also looking up at his master with an inquiring expression as to what would be the next move.

As Buck stood thoughtfully by the roan king, now as docile as a dog, the firing began over at the timber, and he knew that the red-skins and Mexicans were attacking the Rangers.

He knew also, that the belt of timber was several hundred feet wide, and surrounded as they were the Rangers would have to be pretty well scattered to defend themselves.

Creeping up to the hill-top he gazed over.

The Comanches had charged, that was evident, but had been forced to bunt cover, under the hot and unerring fire of the Rangers, who had dropped several warriors from their saddles, and also as many ponies, for Buck saw them lying about upon the prairie.

The fire on the other side from the Mexicans was now pretty hot, and Buck waited anxiously the result.

"Beaten back!" he cried, as he heard the Rangers' well-known cheer and the firing almost ceased.

Then Buck decided to act, and he did it promptly.

Bounding to where his horses were, he quickly separated them.

One was led a hundred yards away and staked out near the top of the rise, though not in sight.

Another was placed a hundred feet from the first animal, and so on until the two captured Indian ponies, the gray mare and Snakeroot were stretched along the rise for five hundred yards.

A blue blanket was left by one, a red by another, and something to serve as a separate disguise by each.

As he left each horse Buck peered over the prairie to see that he was not surprised.

In fifteen minutes he had all arranged and prepared to mount the roan king and carry out his little scheme.

The red-skins were lying out of range of the Rangers' rifles, and not firing, while from the other side of the timber-belt shots were being constantly exchanged between the Mexicans and his comrades.

Suddenly a wild, terrific yell was heard and over the rise dashed Buck on his roan.

Another yell from his lips brought every eye upon him among the Comanches, just as they were preparing for another combined rush upon the Rangers.

Waving his hat, as though beckoning to others to come on, Buck disappeared from the view of the Rangers and the red-skins.

With full speed he rode to the next horse, sprung upon his back, with a blanket about him as a disguise, and dashed up to the top of the rise.

Then another and another horse played the same pantomime, until the Rangers, actually deceived themselves, gave rousing cheers, certain that help was near.

The Comanches had already started in retreat and went off at a rapid rate, not stopping for their dead.

Sweeping around the timber they shouted and gesticulated to the Mexicans, who, seeing them in flight, were convinced that the entire band of Rangers were coming to the rescue, and retreat was at once ordered.

At a very undignified pace the combined force of red-skins and Raiders went, picking up their dead and wounded left at their old position and continuing on rapidly to endeavor to gain a clump of timber two miles away to make a stand against their foes.

In the mean time Buck had collected his horses and advanced toward the timber, laughing himself hoarse, and the Rangers greeted him with cheers which but added to the speed of their enemies, who were now convinced that help had arrived for the Texans.

"Buck Taylor you are boss of 'em all, and I tell you, boy, that but for you, I believe we would have gone up, for Don Rafael saw his chance and was wicked."

"Here's my hand, Buck, and I believe I owe you my life," said Sol Bradford in his manly way.

The others greeted Buck in a like way until he said in an embarrassed manner:

"You make a heap of fuss about nothing."

"I had the horses, and seeing one at different places, and a different man, as they supposed on each, they lighted out, that's all."

"It's a big all, Buck, and I tell you, pard, you are the king of all cowboys I ever struck," returned Bradford.

"Three cheers for the King of the Cowboys!" cried Mack, and they were given with such a will, that the retreating Comanches and Mexicans spurred on the faster, while the Rangers shouted with laughter as they watched them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WARNING.

THE band of Rangers, under Sol Bradford, were but a scouting party, and realizing that they were too weak to attack the combined force of Mexicans and Comanches, they were compelled to give up following them and return to their headquarters camp, situated some thirty miles from where they then were; so they fell back from the field, scalping the dead reds, and burying them for humanity's sake, along with the Mexican whom Buck had killed and who had been left upon the field in the hasty flight of his comrades.

Buck found this Greaser's revolvers and rifle, saddle and bridle far better than his own, so considered himself pretty well fixed for a Ranger.

He told of his capture of the wild horses, and all viewed his splendid roan and the gray mare with envious eyes.

Arriving in camp, Buck became a hero at once, and the roan king was gazed upon with unstinted admiration.

The gray mare was also given just praise, and when Buck related his adventures, in a modest way, Captain McNally said:

"Buck, you will become famous yet, for you have done nobly, and, with two such animals as you now have, I predict great things from you as a Ranger."

"I'll do my best, captain," assured the young horse-tamer, most happy to find that he was among friends, and had a chance to show what he could do.

And he went to work at once with his wild steeds, to thoroughly tame and train them. He seemed to have a spell about him in the management of a dumb brute, for the intelligence that he caused his horses and dog to reveal was remarkable.

The noble equine king soon came to know and love him, while he obeyed the slightest word or gesture of his admiring master.

The gray mare also became well trained, and Buck named her "Miss Mollie," after a Texas sweetheart of his.

In the shooting matches among the men of McNally's command Buck showed that he could win nine times out of ten, and in every horse race the prairie king found no match, while there were but few equals of Miss Mollie in speed.

Going to the nearest town Buck rigged up in Ranger costume, and he soon wholly dropped the awkward, overgrown look he had worn when he rode into the camp to volunteer.

He was liked by all, with one exception—a young man whose envious nature made him hate any one who excelled him in anything.

His name was Roddy Armstrong, and several times he had sought a quarrel with the young horse-tamer, but had been disarmed by the good nature of the cowboy, who would not resent his rudeness and ill-feeling.

Roddy Armstrong was known also by the name of the Dandy Duelist, from the fact that he was a border exquisite in his attire, and had killed several men in personal affairs.

He had come from somewhere down upon the

Rio Grande—had been a ranchero, it was said. He was known to be a most successful gambler, for he generally won at cards with his comrades.

A very handsome man, powerful in build, and a dead shot, he was feared; he was inclined to be quarrelsome, and his sarcasm was wont to provoke trouble.

Captain McNally had often regretted taking him into his command, and from some reason Sol Bradford had always avoided a conflict with him, though opportunities had frequently offered.

When Buck joined the troop Roddy was in the headquarters camp, as the regular encampment of the band was called.

It was on the ranch of Captain McNally, who was a man whose happy home had been broken up by Mexican raiders, and, for revenge, he had turned his cowboys into Rangers, thus forming the gallant squadron of Texans who had won fame on the frontier as brave barriers between the settlers and their foes.

When the party under Captain McNally returned to the Rangers' Ranch, as the headquarters camp was called, and reported the arrival of a recruit in the person of Buck Taylor, a cowboy, Roddy Armstrong had sneered at him and laughed at Sol Bradford for being worsted by him.

"Wait until you see him, Armstrong," Bradford said.

"I am anxious to, and I can master him, though there are few in camp but feel that you could best me in a fight, Sol."

"But we have never had a try, Armstrong, and I hope we never will," was the quiet response.

"Well, I have a curiosity to see this cowboy hero, whom you all make such a fuss about."

"Oh, you'll see him, and my advice is that you don't crow too loud, or he may show his spurs," said Mack.

So when Buck arrived, and his heroism greatly added to by his capture of the roan king, his fight with the three Indians, and escape from the Comanche pursuers and Mexicans, he was regarded as a most remarkable personage.

He was also greatly praised for his ruse that saved the band of Rangers under Sol Bradford, and could not but feel that he was making a name for himself, though he accepted the praise of his comrades in his modest way.

Roddy Armstrong had eyed him curiously and impertinently from head to foot.

A skilled gambler, he was a good reader of human nature, and he saw an honest-faced, brave-hearted fellow, true as steel to a friend and a terror to a foe.

"I'll go slow with this fellow now, but I'll best him in the end," he muttered to himself.

So the Rangers were surprised to see Roddy Armstrong treat Buck with marked kindness.

He drew him out all he could about himself, and when Buck's roan king distanced his fleet horse, Nightmare, he paid his losses with a smile.

"Buck, I know you don't fear the devil, but I warn you to beware of Roddy Armstrong, for he is no man's friend, no matter what he professes to be," said Sol Bradford, one night, after the young cowboy had belonged to the Rangers for several months.

"I thank you, Sol, but he's friendly enough with me," said Buck.

"Don't you trust him."

"Why?"

"You have won his money in horse-racing, though you do not play cards."

"You have beaten him at shooting with both rifle and revolver, and you rode his bucking horse, Suicide, when he could not do it."

"He appears to take it all in good part; but he is an envious devil, and hates any man who worships him, so I tell you to look out for him."

"I don't fear him."

"I know that; but if he strikes you, it will be in the dark, or from behind."

"Mark my words, Buck, and be on your guard."

"I will, thank you, Sol; but I can't believe Roddy Armstrong is as black as you say he is."

"If I thought so, I'd tell him my opinion mighty quick," and Buck walked away; but the warning he had received he could not dismiss as readily as he supposed, and he made up his mind to keep an eye on the Dandy Duelist.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO RANGERS ON A SCOUT.

WITHOUT referring to a number of fights which the gallant Rangers had with the Indians and the long and hard trails upon which they often went, and in all of which Buck the cowboy

won new laurels for his pluck, I will pass over some months of life on the Texan border and speak more particularly of the personal adventures of my hero.

He still held the esteem of all in the band, and to the surprise of all, Roddy Armstrong was his particular friend and champion.

They were always together, the Dandy Duelist and Buck, and often they went together on scouts, always with good results.

Sometimes Sol Bradford accompanied them, and the trio on one occasion returned after a week's absence, with a story of thrilling adventure.

All of them were wounded, though slightly, and they had to cut their way through the entire band of Rafael's Raiders, barely escaping with their lives.

Some weeks after Buck Taylor and Roddy Armstrong got permission to go together upon a scout, to discover the camp of Don Rafael, with a view to a raid upon it by the Rangers.

They mounted their best horses, the Gambler Ranger riding his black horse, Nightmare, and Buck taking Roan King, as the wildest stallion was now altogether called.

They reached the Rio Grande by night, and went into camp on the American shore.

The next day they scouted around and discovered the exact whereabouts of the camp of Don Rafael, the Raider.

"We will lie in camp until to-morrow night, Buck, and then can get near enough to see the Don's force," said Armstrong.

Buck consented and they found a secluded camp.

But the next morning Armstrong said that he would ride out upon a short scout, and, though urged by Buck not to do so, he paid no heed to it.

Hardly had he disappeared when Buck started out on the trail of the gambler.

Several hours after he returned hastily, and threw himself upon his blankets.

A few moments he had been there, when Roddy Armstrong rode into camp.

Buck started up as though just awakened, and called out:

"Hello, Roddy, did you discover anything?"

"No, I had my ride for nothing."

"I didn't think you could get near the camp in daylight; but I guess we can to-night."

"I hope so; but I'm hungry and tired, so I'll eat my dinner and take a nap."

"And as I am rested, I'll clean up my weapons, for they need it."

"Wish you'd clean mine, too, Buck, for I had to swim a stream this morning, and they may be a trifle out of condition."

"I don't mind," was the answer, and Buck went to work with the arms.

The weapons of Roddy Armstrong were of the very finest workmanship.

The revolvers were silver-mounted and had his name engraved on them, with beneath it the word:

"To."

Then followed a space for another name, and the gambler said he left it for the man who killed him.

He often said that whoever took his life was his heir, and should have all that he had to leave.

Buck first cleaned his revolvers and rifle, not forgetting to polish up his bowie-knife, and the weapons were carefully loaded and laid aside.

Then he took up the handsome repeating-rifle belonging to Armstrong, and bearing the name and word "To," as the revolvers and knife did, and gave it a thorough overhauling.

Armstrong, having finished his dinner, laid down to rest and was soon fast asleep.

Thus the afternoon passed, and night came. Then the two friends mounted their horses and started upon a reconnoissance.

It was after midnight when they returned to camp, and Buck said:

"Well, we haven't discovered any more than we knew before."

"No; let us go to bed, and go back in the morning, for we certainly know where Don Rafael's camp is, and that he has not got over half a hundred men, so we can, with our full force, cross the river some night and raid him."

"Yes, we can do it," echoed Buck, and, after a cold snack, they sought their blankets, lying about six feet apart.

For half an hour all was quiet in the camp.

Then the darkness was illumined by three bright flashes and a trio of shots fired in rapid succession.

A few moments more and a horseman, with a led horse, dashed away from the little solitary camp in the timber.

The next night, soon after dark, that horseman with the led animal rode into the Rangers' Ranch. He was Roddy Armstrong, the Dandy Duelist; and going straight up to the quarters of Captain McNally, he dismounted and entered.

His face was pale and he looked haggard.

"Ho, Armstrong, back again, I see?" said the Ranger Captain.

"Yes, sir; and I have bad news."

"Ha! Buck Taylor went with you?" cried the captain.

"Yes, sir; and poor Buck has gone on his last trail," was the sad response.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GAMBLER'S STORY.

CAPTAIN MCNALLY sprung to his feet at the words of the Gambler Ranger, and two others present were also much excited.

"Do you mean Buck Taylor is dead, Armstrong?" cried the captain.

"Yes, sir."

"How is this?" he asked in a sad tone.

"Well, sir, I barely escaped with my life, I assure you, and I will give you the story as it occurred."

"Do so."

"It was poor Buck's idea that we should cross the river and—"

"You mean the Rio Grande?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right."

"He thought if we got into Mexico we could find the exact whereabouts of Don Rafael's camp."

"Poor brave fellow."

"He said if we could find the camp, locate it well, and get the approaches down fine, and not be discovered ourselves, that we could dash across the river some night with all the Rangers, surprise the Don and break up his band, besides destroying his camp and getting back before day with lots of booty."

"Yes, he proposed this to me, but I told him we had no right to go upon Mexican territory, and besides it was a most hazardous undertaking which might result in the loss of my entire company."

"Well, Captain McNally, urged by Buck, I consented to cross the river, and we did so the night following our leaving camp here."

"We found a good hiding-place in the hills, and the next day reconnoitered as best we could and discovered the Raiders' retreat."

"We camped near it that night, and the next day made no discoveries of importance."

"But at night we started out to get a closer look at the approaches, and see what force the Don had there."

"We made the discovery that the retreat could be easily reached, surprised and taken, by the Rangers, if they could secretly cross the river, and returning to our camp we went to bed, for we were very tired."

"How long I had been asleep I do not know, but I was awakened by shots, and springing to my feet I called to Buck, as I seized my weapons for use."

"But Buck did not move and I sprung to his side and found that he was dead."

"The shots were still ringing, and bullets flying, so I dashed through the timber, reached my horse, sprung upon his back, and then saw that I could also carry the Roan King with me."

"I drew up the stake rope, grabbed my saddle and bridle and fled."

"Are you sure that Buck was dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was no mistake?"

"None, sir."

"You tried to rouse him?"

"A whisper would rouse Buck Taylor, sir, from his soundest sleep."

"But he was dead, I am as sure as I am that I am alive."

"But who fired upon you?"

"Don Rafael's Raiders."

"Not Comanches?"

"No, sir, for by the flashing of the firearms I saw that they were Mexicans and plenty of them."

"Well, you were lucky to escape, Armstrong."

"We had been seen reconnoitering the camp, doubtless, and were tracked to where we passed the night."

"That is doubtless the way of it."

"But you brought Buck's horse?"

"Yes, sir, I led him here all the way, and having left my provision haversack I had nothing to eat."

"You only saved your weapons then?"

"And my life."

"I tell you, Captain McNally, that was the

hottest place I was ever in, and I am surprised I got away."

"Why those fellows fired upon us as we slept, and my idea is that they supposed we were both sleeping on the same blanket and so poor Buck got all the bullets."

"But I lay ten feet away and was not seen, I suppose, until I started to my feet."

"Well, Armstrong, you are a brave man, as I know, and a cool one under fire, so I do not think you are one to run off and leave a comrade in trouble."

"No man dare accuse me of it, Captain McNally," was the hot reply.

"I said that you were not one to do so, and I therefore feel convinced that Buck Taylor is dead."

"But I shall avenge him."

"Ay, sir, and gladly will I do all in my power to aid you, for I was deeply attached to the young cowboy."

"You discovered where Don Rafael's camp was situated?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is easy of access, you say?"

"Yes, very."

"You can lead us there?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then, as soon as the two scouting parties now out came in, I shall start on a raid across the Rio Grande, to return Don Rafael's many visits."

"I wish to take my entire force, we will ride our best horses, and I shall carry the war into Mexico with a vengeance, for Buck Taylor, that King of Cowboys, shall be bitterly avenged." And all who knew Captain McNally were well aware that he meant every word he uttered.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN APPARITION.

THE LOSS OF BUCK TAYLOR fell like a pall upon the Ranger band.

The death of their captain would hardly have created a greater degree of sorrow, and the stories of his short but adventurous career was talked over again and again around the campfire.

There was not a man in camp that did not wish to fall heir to Roan King, his magnificent horse, the gray mare, Snakeroot and Vermifuge.

The latter looked most sorrowful, seeming to realize that he had lost his best friend.

Sol Bradford suggested that the Rangers should club together and buy Roan King for their captain.

"Who would you buy him from?" asked Roddy Armstrong.

This question was a poser; for if Buck was dead, who owned his outfit?

He was known to have an uncle, but the uncle was said to be well off, owning a large ranch, and no one had ever heard Buck speak of other relatives.

He had managed to lay up some money, the sales of his captures, and it was in the captain's keeping.

Then he had half a dozen horses and his dog.

Such was the cowboy's fortune.

What to do with Roan King was the main question, for all wanted that animal of lightning speed.

Roddy Armstrong had suggested that he should have the animal, as he had saved him from falling into the hands of the Mexican Raiders.

But he saw that the Rangers did not take kindly to this proposition, and Sol Bradford suggested that they should raffle him off, all taking a chance at ten dollars, or enough chances to make him bring a thousand dollars.

Thus it was settled, and the Rangers quickly took their chances, and the list was made up.

The money was paid over to the captain, to be held by him until he communicated with Buck's uncle, and their chances were taken on Miss Mollie, Snakeroot, whose worth had come to be fully recognized in the band, and the other horses and the dog Vermifuge, who looked silently and sadly on.

The numbers were then written on pieces of paper and put in a bag, and each man had as many draws as he had chances, the lucky number being written in blue ink instead of black, so that there could be only fairness in the drawing.

Captain McNally was to hold the bag, and he having taken several chances, was to have the first draw.

"All ready."

As the captain uttered the words, a tall form suddenly advanced into the circle.

It was a form that towered several inches

over six feet, but it was bent now, and the face was haggard and white.

"Buck Taylor!"

The name burst in a yell from the crowd of Rangers.

They saw before them the man that they believed dead.

They beheld the one whose little property they were then raffling off.

But was it Buck Taylor in flesh and blood, or his apparition?

It seemed almost the latter, so white was his face, so haggard, and so bent his tall form.

"Great Heavens! Buck, is it you?" cried Captain McNally, grasping his hand and dropping the chance-bag.

"What's left of me, captain," was the reply, with a sad smile.

"Thank God you are not dead."

"I'm second cousin to it."

The Rangers now gathered around, and grasped the hand of the cowboy, and among the first was Roddy Armstrong, who said:

"Buck, old fellow, I believed you dead, or I never would have left you."

"Forgive me, Buck, for I'd have died right there rather than desert you, unless I thought you were surely dead."

"I guess you thought so, Roddy."

"In fact I know you did."

"Only I wasn't dead," was the reply.

Then the captain saw that the young Ranger was really suffering, and he said:

"Come, Buck, you look half-starved and used up."

"Come to my quarters and I'll bring you round all right."

He led Buck away, and Sol Bradford and Mack Hastings, the old Ranger, followed.

The crowd broke up, going to their respective quarters to talk, over the strange affair, and wonder how the cowboy had escaped.

"He's been through the mill, from his looks; but I guess he'll tell us soon, for Buck is willing to talk over his adventures, though he never brags," said one.

Going up to the quarters of the captain, Buck was placed in an easy-chair, and the negro servant of the Ranger chief hastened to place food before him.

He lay back in his chair for awhile, silent and motionless.

Then he aroused himself and ate heartily of the food brought him by Black Sam.

Having dispatched supper enough for two men, and braced up with several tin-cups full of strong coffee, he became brighter, and said:

"I was almost starved, for I haven't had a taste of food for three days, and I have walked nearly two hundred miles besides."

"I tell you, pard, I was pretty well played out, strong as I am, and I had a pretty severe hurt here, too," and he placed his hand over his heart, while he fixed his eyes separately upon the faces of Captain McNally, Sol Bradford and old Mack Hastings.

"Are you wounded, Buck?" hastily asked the captain.

"No sir, only hurt, that's all; but it will be all right soon."

"I think I'll go to my roost now," and without saying one word about his remarkable escape Buck Taylor arose and went to his own little cabin, where he and Roddy Armstrong had lived together, for the Rangers had erected for themselves log houses on the ranch of their captain, and lived in them by twos, fours, or as their humor suited them.

CHAPTER XV.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

WHEN Buck entered his little cabin all was darkness within.

But he quickly struck a match and lighted a lamp.

It was a small but cosey little hut, built of small logs, with stucco between, and had a generous fire-place.

Upon the hearth were a number of culinary utensils, and in either rear corner was a rustic cot.

A table was in the center, a shelf on one side of the hearth and upon it were dishes and provisions, while on the other side were shelves of books of various sizes, but mostly novels of a light character.

Over the mantle were firearms, and about on the walls were the skins of wild animals and feathers of birds.

Roddy Armstrong had been the only one of the Rangers who had no cabin comrade, and he had asked Buck to be his chum.

The young cowboy had consented, and as the reader has seen, in spite of the warning given

him by Sol Bradford, Buck had become most friendly with the Dandy Duelist.

Hardly had Buck entered the cabin, when with a yelp of joy Vermifuge came bounding in and seemed in ecstasies over his master's return.

The dog had been off on a quiet and solitary hunt, as was his wont, and had caught the trail of his master when he entered the camp.

"Well, old dog, glad to see me back, aren't you? Wish I'd had you with me, for you'd have caught me some game to eat, at least," said Buck.

After caressing the dog for a minute, Buck threw himself, dressed as he was, down upon his cot, and at once sunk into a tired, deep sleep.

He had been asleep for several hours, his faithful dog lying near and watching him, when in the open door stepped Roddy Armstrong.

"Ho, Buck, old fellow, are you asleep?"

At the sound of his voice Buck Taylor awoke instantly, and replied:

"I was, but I am wide awake now."

"I am sorry I disturbed you! but we were having a little game of cards in Bradford's cabin, and as it was after midnight, I concluded to come home, for I wished to learn how you escaped."

"You won your game of cards, of course, Roddy?"

"Well, yes, for I always do, you know."

"Well, Armstrong, there is a game I wish you to play with me, and see if you will win."

"Why you never play?"

"I play some games."

"Come, go and ask Sol Bradford to go with you, and I'll call by for the captain."

"It is late, but I see the moon is as bright as day, and in a quarter of an hour I will meet you over at the spring."

"But be sure and bring Sol Bradford with you."

The gambler looked at Buck in surprise, and asked:

"Why what is the matter, Buck, for you act as though your brain was turned?"

"You heard my request, Roddy Armstrong, and, if you do not meet me, as I wish, I will come after you."

"Hal! you are angry with me for leaving you, when I was sure you were dead, and seek to pick a quarrel with me, do you?"

"Call it so."

"Well, Buck Taylor, if you ask it I am no man to refuse."

"My record don't show it, as you know."

"You will be there?"

"Yes."

"In a quarter of an hour?"

"Sooner if necessary."

"And will bring Bradford with you?"

"Yes."

"All right."

So saying he walked out of the cabin, Vermifuge trotting at his heels, and he took the path leading to Captain McNally's quarters.

The captain had been writing some letters, and had not retired.

In fact he was wont to keep such late hours that the boys called him "The Owl."

But then the captain had little memories in his heart, for he could recall a few years before when the Rangers' Ranch was his happy home.

His wife and children, a boy and girl, had dwelt there with him, fortune favored him, and the future promised only happiness and prosperity.

He had gone from home to the town, when one night the Mexican Raiders or Comanches which, he was never sure, and perhaps both, had gone to his ranch and death and desolation had followed.

Three of his cowboys lay dead about the house, having sold their lives to save others.

His son lay murdered upon the doorstep and within his wife was a raving maniac, while his daughter, a beautiful girl of ten years, was nowhere to be seen.

What had occurred Mrs. McNally could never tell, but she raved of "red-handed Comanches and Mexican fiends" in a breath.

The stricken father could gain no satisfactory clew, but he vowed a bitter revenge upon the murderers, be they whom they might.

With his son dead, his wife in a lunatic asylum, and his little daughter's fate unknown, Captain McNally's memories were so bitter that he never slept unless worn out, and he was wont always to keep late hours.

So it was that Buck found him up, and he said in his quiet, kindly way:

"Come in, Buck, for I am glad to have company, and, by the way, you have not told me of your escape."

"No, sir, but I come now to ask you if you

have confidence enough in me to go with me to the spring, where I intend to fight a duel."

"You fight a duel, Buck?" asked the surprised captain.

"Yes, sir."

"But you are in no condition to meet any foe."

"Your clothes are still covered with mud, your face is haggard, and—"

"I am able to fight, captain, and I ask you to merely be a witness."

"But, Buck, I—"

"If you cannot do so, sir, say so frankly; but I ask you to have confidence enough in me to go with me."

"I'll go, Buck, for the Texan border laws allow quarrels to be settled squarely among men, man to man."

"But I hope this matter can be arranged."

"It cannot be, sir."

"Who is your foe?"

"Roddy Armstrong, sir," was the calm response.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MIDNIGHT DUEL.

CAPTAIN MCNALLY started, when Buck Taylor told him the name of the man with whom he had cause for quarrel.

But he put on his hat and walked out of the cabin with the young cowboy.

The moon was at its full and shone with the luster so beautiful in southern latitudes.

The dozen cabins scattered about the large ranch showed no light, excepting one.

That one was the cabin of the two men who were going to the spring to meet in deadly combat.

The door of their cabin was wide open, and the lamp on the table within was distinctly visible.

The camp seemed buried in deep repose, and the numerous horses, tired of eating, were lying down upon the prairie, where they were staked out.

Afar off on the prairie was a dark object visible, still as death.

It was a Ranger vedette, for a watch of two men was kept during the long hours of the night, even when in camp.

The Rangers cared not to be surprised by their wily foes, be they Comanches or Mexicans.

In the background of the camp was a ridge, heavily timbered.

Therein was the spring where Buck Taylor had bidden the gambler to meet him.

When Buck and the captain reached the timber they beheld two forms standing in an open space near the spring.

They were Roddy Armstrong and Sol Bradford, and they were standing near each other, and there was silence between them.

"Well, Armstrong, I am here at the request of Buck Taylor, who has told me that he demands a meeting with you," said the captain.

"So he told me, and as he is determined in his demand, I shall gratify him," the gambler replied.

"But what motive can there be between you two, for a deadly feud?"

"Has he not told you, sir?" quickly asked Roddy Armstrong.

"Not a word, so I appeal to you."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"If Buck is grieved that you should have deserted him, I am more than willing to testify that you did not do so from cowardice, but to save yourself, believing he was dead."

"No, Captain McNally, the leaving of Roddy Armstrong is not the grievance I have to settle with him."

"He knows just why we meet, and the matter remains a mystery between us, and people can judge as they please as to which of us is wrong," said Buck.

"Buck is determined for this meeting, captain, so let us have it over; but I have a proposition to make."

"Well, Armstrong?" the captain said.

"I am a natural gambler, I believe, and I'm willing to make or lose on this meeting."

"I want Buck Taylor's Roan King and his outfit, and I will place my outfit, horses, money and all, against his."

"The one who lives inherits the dead man's little fortune."

"All right," said Buck, coolly.

"This is a strange proposition, Armstrong."

"It's gambling on a life, captain, and that adds greater zest to the meeting between us."

"I am ready now, whenever Sol arranges with you how we are to fight."

"Revolvers at fifteen paces suits me," coolly said Buck.

"Will my revolvers do, for I see you have none on?" the gambler asked.

"Oh, yes, for they are splendid weapons," Buck returned.

Sol Bradford now held a few words with Captain McNally, and the two silver-mounted revolvers of Roddy Armstrong were taken for the meeting, and being closely examined, were found to be already loaded and in good condition.

"They ought to be, for Buck gave them a good cleaning for me only a few days ago," and the gambler laughed in a light, reckless way.

Captain McNally then stepped off the fifteen paces, and the two men were placed in position.

It was decided that they should stand with their backs toward each other, and wheeling at the word—fire.

Sol Bradford left it for the captain to give the word, and then all was in readiness.

The two men were as cool as an icicle.

Neither showed the slightest dread of the ordeal they were passing through, though Buck was strangely quiet for him, while the gambler was in a most reckless mood, but it seemed a trifle forced.

As the men were ready in position, Captain McNally called out:

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Buck, promptly.

"I am ready to await the result," responded Armstrong.

"Fire!"

The men wheeled together as though on pivots, and their revolvers were quickly at a level.

Then the pistols flashed, almost together, though one was a second sooner than the other.

Buck Taylor had been the quicker of the two, and his bullet pierced the brain of the gambler, whose shot flew wild, for his aim had been destroyed by death.

In his tracks sunk Roddy Armstrong, and Sol Bradford sprung to his side.

"He is dead, Buck."

"Yes, I shot to kill," was the cool rejoinder.

"Well, Buck, you had better seek rest now, for you are really used up, and we will carry the body to the hospital, there to remain until morning," said Captain McNally.

"I will help you do so, sir, and then go with you to your ranch, for I desire to solve this mystery to you and to Sol, though to others it must remain a secret," and bending over, Buck raised the form in his strong arms, and carried it to the little log hospital.

There it was placed on a cot, the door was locked, and the three went to the captain's quarters, the Ranger leader and Sol Bradford most curious to know the mystery of that midnight duel between two who had appeared the best of friends.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERY.

FOR some time after entering the cabin of the captain, the three men sat in silence.

Each one of them seemed occupied with his own thoughts, and they were certainly of a sad nature.

The captain's home was a comfortable one, and the lamp burned brightly, showing the faces of the three men as they sat there together.

Buck Taylor's face was still haggard.

He had recuperated rapidly, from his having eaten a good meal and had a few hours' sleep, but he still looked as though he was very wretched.

At last he said, and he spoke slowly:

"Captain McNally, I am sorry that I had to fight a duel with a fellow member; but I will tell you and Sol why I did so, and you can judge whether I was right or wrong."

"To others, for the sake of all concerned, it had better remain a mystery."

"I feel, Buck, that you did not act hastily in the matter," said the captain.

"When Roddy came to me and told me that he was to fight a duel, and with you, Buck, I was sure that you had the right of it."

"He asked me to go with him, and more he would not say, so I was wholly in ignorance of the cause of the quarrel between you," Sol Bradford remarked.

"I went from here, you both remember, on a secret scout with Armstrong?"

"Yes."

"It was my desire, as you are aware, captain, to find the camp of the Raiders, and see if they could not be surprised there at some time."

"You so told me, but I feared to invade Mexico, for I dreaded complications arising therefrom with the Government."

"Well, sir, Armstrong and myself crossed the

river at a ford that was seldom used, and we found a hiding-place to camp, not very far from the retreat of the Raiders.

"From the very first I had not liked Armstrong, and Sol here told me to beware of him."

"So I constantly watched him, until I at last began to like the man immensely, and believed he was my friend in all honesty."

"Why I doubted him on this trip, I do not know; but I did."

"It came upon me to watch him, and I decided to do so."

"In our camp in Mexico we dared not move out by day, only by night, seeking to reconnoiter."

"But Armstrong said that he would go out on a small reconnaissance, and I made no objection."

"He mounted his horse and rode away."

"I at once followed him, but on foot."

"To my surprise he rode boldly toward the retreat of the Raiders, and watching him from the hillside, I saw him go down the valley for several miles."

"I dared not follow any further, and so was about to return, when I saw two horsemen riding toward him."

"They came from the direction of the Raiders' retreat, which was in the midst of a group of hills beyond, where the meeting between Armstrong and the men took place."

"I expected to see trouble follow, but Armstrong showed no hostile intent, and the others met him quietly."

"For a long time the three talked together, seated upon their horses, and then they started back the way that my pard had gone."

"I retreated toward my camp until I reached a spur of the hills which gave me a view of the trail leading to our camp."

"There I stopped and waited."

"After awhile Armstrong came in sight and the two men were with him."

"As they were then but a quarter of a mile away I could see that the strangers were Raiders, for they wore the Mexican dress, red sombrero, and were mounted upon black horses, as are Rafael's men."

"And Armstrong was with them?"

"Yes, captain."

"No sign of hostility between them?"

"No, sir."

"Go on, Buck."

"I saw Armstrong point in the direction of our camp and then the three parted, the men going back the way they had come, and Armstrong coming on toward our camp."

"I ran hastily back, and when he came pretended to have been sleeping on my blankets."

"He said he had made no discovery, and soon lay down to rest, while I went to cleaning up my weapons, feeling sure he would ask me to look after his."

"He did, and I cleaned them nicely for him, only I did not load them with ball cartridge again."

"That night when we retired, I kept awake, for I was prepared for treachery."

"He soon supposed I was asleep and, raising himself to a sitting posture, deliberately leveled at me his revolver."

"I knew the weapon was not loaded, so did not move, and he pulled trigger, firing several shots rapidly."

"Great heavens! Armstrong did this, Buck?" cried the captain.

"He did, sir."

"I feared it, and so I warned you, for I knew the man well," said Sol Bradford quietly.

"But the result, Buck, for now you have solved the mystery of your meeting with Armstrong, I wish to know what else he did."

"I will tell you all, sir," was Buck's calm rejoinder.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COWBOY KING'S ORDEAL.

"WELL, sir," continued Buck, after he had been silent an instant, while the face of Captain McNally was the picture of amazement, "it was my intention to spring upon Armstrong, after I saw just what he meant to do, and let him feel that I yet lived to thwart him."

"But I lay as motionless as though I was dead, and bending over me he quickly removed my revolvers and rifle from where they were in reach of my hand."

"I was thus disarmed, but did not move, and he turned away with the remark:

"Now I am the king of the Ranger band, and his splendid horse is mine."

"Envy of you caused his deep hatred," said Sol.

"Yes, he was most envious, indeed," the captain remarked.

"But we interrupt you, Buck."

"Hardly had he spoken when I heard a voice hail in Spanish:

"Ho, señor! Is all right?"

"Yes, come on!" was the reply of Armstrong.

"Then I felt the danger I was in, but to move at that moment I knew was certain death."

"So I lay still, playing possum, and into the camp came five men."

"They were mounted, and though the darkness was intense, I soon discovered that they were Road Raiders from what was said, for you know I speak a little Spanish."

"The one who appeared to be the leader, said:

"Did you kill him, señor?"

"Yes, he lies there; but let us have a fire for light, as there is no danger now."

"They looked for matches, but not one of them had any, and they searched my pockets, but found none."

"I had put the tin box of matches on a limb of a tree near the fire, which, for safety, I had put out after we had our supper."

"This circumstance saved me, for they could not see that I was not dead."

"Well, señor, what news have you?" said the leader, addressing Armstrong.

"Not much, excepting, as I told your men this morning, that we had been sent here to see if we could attack your camp with our Ranger band, and we decided that it could be done with success."

"But will not be now," said the Mexican, who was Don Rafael himself."

"No! that villain?"

"Yes, captain."

"But continue, Buck, for I am deeply interested, as also grieved to find that I had a traitor in my band."

"Well, captain, Armstrong then suggested that it would be a good thing for him to return, report that the Raiders had killed his pard, and tell you that the Mexican camp could be easily reached and raided with your Rangers."

"He was to cross the Rio Grande by a certain ford, where we crossed, and a man was to be there to see us crossing, and then ride on and give the alarm, when the Rangers were to be led into an ambush, Armstrong riding some distance ahead, pretending to look for a trail, so as to escape the fire poured upon you."

"Thus hemmed in your entire band would be massacred."

"The accursed fiend," said Captain McNally, with savage earnestness.

"It was like Armstrong," Sol Bradford remarked.

"What then, Buck?"

"For this, sir, Armstrong was to receive a handsome reward, and what was said proved to me that he had been a spy among the Rangers for Don Rafael, ever since he had joined them."

"My weapons and outfit, of saddle and bridle were then divided among the men, and Armstrong claimed my horse, saying nothing about his being the roan king, which, you know, the Raiders had tried hard to catch when he was a wild horse."

"Yes; but oh! if I had only suspected that he was a traitor," and the flashing eyes of Captain McNally showed what he would have done.

"Now comes the terrific part of my experience," Buck Taylor continued.

"Having arranged matters to their satisfaction, Armstrong asked the Don to let his men bury me, and the latter ordered them to do so, telling them to then follow him to camp."

"Armstrong and the Don then walked off to where our horses were picketed, the Mexican leading his horse, while his four men at once set to work to bury me."

"It was a task they did not like, for they were too lazy to work."

"But they found a soft place, hacked away at it with their knives and soon had a shallow grave dug."

"I was in agony, captain; I can tell you and Sol that in all truth."

"I do not wonder, for it was appalling," said Captain McNally.

"I know no man but you who would have had the nerve to play dead and allow himself to be buried, Buck," Sol said with a shudder.

"The experience was something I would not risk again for a fortune."

"But the Greasers were too lazy to dig deep, and so they dragged me to the grave, rolled me in, and I turned so as to fall face down."

"Then they joked about my legs being too long, and doubled them up to fit the length of the grave."

"It was an ordeal that makes me shudder to think of it; but I managed to so fall in as to protect my head with one arm as well as I could."

"Then in came the dirt on top of me, and it took every atom of nerve I possessed not to give a yell and spring out."

"But, if I did, I knew it would spoil all, and I would never catch Armstrong, as I intended to do."

"I could have scared those Mexicans out of their wits; but Armstrong, I feared, had not yet ridden away, nor the Don, for I supposed they were near by, out near our horses, and I could do nothing."

"So I stood it, fearful as it was, and I knew, too, that the grave was not over two feet deep, and I could raise that amount of dirt."

"Every bit that fell upon me I felt the thud of."

"When this ceased I knew that the work was done, that I was buried."

"My arm I had brought around so as to form a space for my face, and a little breathing place."

"But I began to feel smothered, and at last, unable to stand it any longer, I braced myself and raised myself slowly."

"It was no easy task, I assure you; but I got out at last, half-dead, half-blinded, and in a humor that was devilish, I can assure you."

"The Mexicans had not been gone a minute, for they were just riding away, not two hundred feet off, for I could see them."

"I stood for a long time, getting the dirt off of me, and then went to the little stream near, and washed my face."

"The water revived me, for I was really weak, and I felt better."

"But I was alone in Mexico, unarmed and alone, and I knew my danger."

"I had nothing to eat, not a weapon to protect myself, or a blanket to lie on."

"But I struck off for the river and reached it before dawn."

"I swam across, and seeking a hiding-place, lay down in my wet clothes and sunk to sleep."

"I awoke with a nightmare, for I was again being buried."

"I tried to sleep again, but it was no use, so I started on my way."

"Soon after sunrise I halted again, determined to travel only by night, and I went to sleep."

"I've heard it said that you get nightmare from going to bed after a hearty meal."

"I was awful hungry for food, and though it was broad daylight, I had the nightmare, and I had it bad."

"I dreamt that I was buried, and couldn't get out!"

"My God!" said the captain, and again Sol Bradford shivered, as though with a chill.

"I awoke at last and decided to keep awake."

"So the day passed."

"But why tell you of my long tramp, and how much I suffered, for I am here, and all right again."

"And avenged?"

"Yes, Sol, and you can understand how willing I was to risk my life to get revenge, for Armstrong proved himself a base traitor, and more, he meant to betray you all."

"I noted him well, when I returned, and he became livid for an instant, at sight of me, as though he had seen a ghost."

"But he quickly recovered himself, and greeted me with the rest of you."

"How I had escaped, he could not imagine, but doubtless supposed that I had been only stunned by his shots, and recovered consciousness after he left, thus escaping from the Mexicans."

"That I suspected him he did not believe, after I greeted him; but then I bided my time, took a sleep to collect my nerves, and when he came to the cabin simply told him he must meet me."

"Though he is dead, and by my hand. I think I can sleep now, without having the nightmare."

"But, as I told you, I prefer that the cause of our duel remain a secret, as it must never be known that the Rangers had a traitor so vile among them."

"It shall remain a secret, Buck, for it is best; but tell me, Sol, did you ever know Armstrong before he joined?"

"I did, sir, and I will tell you a secret now," and Sol Bradford spoke with emotion.

"The truth is, captain, Roddy Armstrong was my half-brother."

"His mother and mine were the same, but my mother married a second time, a Mexican, Don Rodriguez by name, and Armstrong was his son."

"His name was Armstrong Rodriguez, our

mother having been a Miss Armstrong, and he reversed his name after her death, and went to the bad.

"He always hated me, and I held no love for him, for I knew his vile nature."

"But I kept silent when he joined the Rangers, though I always had the fear that he would do some wrong."

"He often tried to provoke me into a quarrel, but you will remember I shunned it, and it was because we had the same mother."

"You have rid the earth of a very bad man, Buck," and Sol Bradford held out his hand, and the young cowboy grasped it warmly, as he did also that of Captain McNally, who said earnestly:

"From my heart I thank you, Buck Taylor."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RANGERS ON A RAID.

WHEN the morning dawned on the Rangers' Ranch, and it became known that Roddy Armstrong lay dead in the hospital-cabin, slain in a duel with Buck Taylor after midnight, that body of gallant men were more exercised over the affair than they usually allowed themselves to be about anything.

Captain McNally, before going to bed, after Buck and Sol had retired from his cabin, had given orders to his negro servant to ask several of the Rangers in the morning, to see to the burial of Armstrong.

He gave him the hospital key, and the negro, soon after sunrise, had gone upon his errand.

Of the particulars he knew nothing.

He was only aware that his master had said that Armstrong had been killed in a duel with Buck Taylor, during the night, and was to be buried that morning.

The Rangers informed of the news, thought of seeking the captain for further information.

But the negro said the captain had ordered breakfast at nine o'clock, as he had been up about all night, and did not wish to be disturbed before.

They then glanced toward Buck's cabin, and the door was tightly closed, so they would not disturb him, as it was natural to suppose that he too had been up all night.

Then they went to the hospital.

The door was unlocked and there lay on a cot, the handsome form of the Gambler Ranger.

The little round spot on the forehead showed where the bullet had entered.

There was a smile upon his face, but it was the smile of death and repulsive.

Then the Rangers let loose the news, and the whole band was soon aware of the deadly duel of the night before.

Sol Bradford was seen and told of the affair, but he made no response.

At length the door of the captain's cabin opened and he appeared.

After breakfast he walked down toward Buck's cabin.

The young cowboy was up, had cooked his breakfast, and looked much refreshed in clean clothes and after his rest.

"Will you accompany me, Buck?" asked the captain.

"Where, sir?"

"To the hospital, for I intend to make a few words of explanation to the men, who expect it, though nothing that you can object to?"

"Oh, yes, I will go."

So they walked together to the hospital. All of the Rangers were gathered there, and they gazed fixedly at Buck as he came up.

But he greeted them in his good-natured way, while Captain McNally said:

"Comrades, I desire to make known to you that last night a duel was fought in camp."

"It is to be deplored that quarrels arise among ourselves; but this was a case in which our dead companion justly lost his life, and the one who killed him, Buck Taylor, I exonerate fully."

A wild cheer broke forth at these words, and Captain McNally continued:

"This was no fracas, but a duel, in which I was the second of Buck Taylor, and Sol Bradford acted for Armstrong."

"Armstrong fell at the first fire, and our comrade here was unburt."

Again a cheer was given.

"Now let me ask you to bear the dead body to the grave, and let your sympathy be with the one who was forced to become his slayer."

As a token of their sympathy the Rangers pressed about Buck and grasped his hand.

They knew there was some secret back of all this, but they did not seek to discover it, for they had confidence in their captain, and felt that all had gone well.

And so it was that Armstrong was borne to

his grave, over in the timber, and one of the Rangers, who had once been a divinity student, but who had turned prairie rover, read the service of the dead above his body, no one, but the three in the secret, suspecting how unworthy he was of the ceremony.

After the funeral Captain McNally returned to his cabin, where Buck awaited him, for he had gone thero to await until the burial was over, and turned over to him the property of the dead Ranger.

The money Buck turned into the Rangers' treasury, along with all else, excepting the magnificent weapons, and Mexican saddle and bridle which had been envied by all of the band, while the horse 'Nightmare' he also kept.

After several days had passed, and Buck Taylor had fully recovered from the fearful ordeal and hardships through which he had passed, he suggested to the captain that it would be a good idea for the Rangers to make a night raid upon the retreat of the band of Don Rafael. "We can cross at another ford, sir, and by night, so as to strike their camp before midnight, and we can get back over the river before dawn, and the retaliation will be just what the Mexican Raiders deserve."

Captain McNally had already decided upon this move, for he was anxious to annihilate the Mexican outlaws if he could do so, and avenge those Texans upon whom they had raided.

A number of times had Don Rafael come upon Texan territory, leaving ruin and death in his path, and the Rangers also had lost many a brave fellow at their hands.

"I will go, Buck, whenever you deem it best," was the reply.

"Say to-night, sir, for we can strike a hiding place on the river before dawn and rest until the next night, when we can make our dash across."

So it was decided, and that night after sunset, Captain McNally left the Rangers' Ranch with sixty gallant fellows at his back, all splendidly mounted and armed, and Buck Taylor was the guide of the expedition.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RANGERS ON THE WAR-PATH.

THE ride of the Rangers, to the point on the Rio Grande, where they meant to hide during the day was made before dawn, and they were led to a most secluded and desirable spot by their young guide, Buck Taylor.

Vermifuge had been taken along by his master, and he had been given a place on one of the pack-horses, for the Rangers always went well supplied with extra ammunition and provisions, and Alf, the captain's negro servant, was in charge of the half-dozen animals bearing the packs.

Having had a ride for the most part of the way, Vermifuge was not too tired to stand guard, and the Rangers accordingly had a breakfast before dawn and took to their blankets, leaving the faithful dog on watch.

The horses were "in clover," so to put it, for fresh water and quantities of grass was about them, and they quickly fell to work for a feed before taking a rest after their long trail.

It was just dark on the following night when the camp awakened to busy life.

A good supper was cooked and partaken of, the men and horses had had a long day's rest, and all were anxious for the march into the land of the Raiders.

Buck again took the lead, this time with Captain McNally at his side, and the cavalcade started for the Rio Grande at an unfrequented ford.

The river was reached and crossed without accident, and there the Rangers started on the rapid gallop of ten miles to the camp of Don Rafael.

The trail led by the scene of Roddy Armstrong's treachery, and Buck pointed it out as the spot where he had been fired upon and made his escape.

He shuddered at the remembrance of that awful night, as he gazed into the timber, and Captain McNally and Sol dropped out of the line and rode to the spot to see the grave.

The moon shone brightly and they beheld the spot where the dashing young cowboy had so near'y met his fate, and, but for his having made the weapons of the gambler harmless, would have done so.

They soon overtook the Rangers, and the captain headed the line once more.

"We saw the grave, Buck, and I assure you it gave me the horrors to think of it."

"But how far is the Raiders' camp from here?" said the captain.

"About three mile, sir."

"And we will be able to approach unseen, think you?"

"Until we strike the sentinel, sir, and then we must charge over him and strike the camp."

"You told me that Rafael had fully a hundred men?"

"All of that number."

"Well, we are sixty Texan Rangers, and I would not fear double that number, especially when we take them by surprise, as we will."

In a short while more Buck brought his horse down to a walk, the others following his example, and it was not long before they entered a deep, narrow canyon that led to the camps of the Raiders, which the young guide said was in a small valley beyond.

A short distance from the mouth of the canyon a voice was heard calling out in Spanish:

"Halt! who comes?"

"Amigos," replied Buck in Spanish.

The answer seemed not one that was expected, for instantly a shot was fired, and a Ranger dropped dead from his saddle.

"Now, sir, we must dash on!" cried Buck.

"Charge!"

The command was given by the captain, and the Rangers swept through the canyon like an avalanche.

The Mexican sentinel on duty, and who had fired at Buck's answer to the challenge, pleaded for mercy, as he was unable to escape.

But he was ridden down mercilessly beneath the iron hoofs of the Rangers.

Through the canyon they swept, and, an irresistible mass, they poured out into the valley.

It was a beautiful spot, several hundred acres in size, and around it were towering and precipitous hills.

Through the valley ran a swiftly flowing stream, and the meadow-lands were dotted with hundreds of horses and cattle.

Beneath the shelter of the cliffs to the north were a number of cabins, fully a score of them, and toward these the Rangers rode.

The shot from the sentinel in the canyon had been heard by the camp guard, and he had at once blown an alarm upon the bugle.

Instantly all was excitement, and men poured out from several of the larger cabins, just as the Rangers charged upon them.

It was a hot, fierce fight, but only for a few minutes, as but a couple of dozen men resisted the onslaught of the attacking force.

It was very evident that Don Rafael and his main force were not in their retreat.

Those who met the Rangers were shot down without mercy, for the Texans were "fighting the devil with fire," or to put it as it was, they were waging war upon the Mexican Raiders as Don Rafael had upon the land over the Rio Grande.

The moon shone brightly, and all had a chance to see what they were about.

But the cabins presented food for flames, and these were soon burning fiercely, while the booty was being dragged out from the store-houses and packed upon the horses of the Mexicans, which were caught and put to that use.

An inquiry showed that Don Rafael and his riders were off on a raid, perhaps over among the settlements of Texas, and Captain McNally determined to make a clean sweep of the robbers' den.

Parties were sent out to drive up the cattle and horses, and upon the backs of many of the captured animals the booty of the outlaws was packed.

A two hours' stay in the camp was sufficient, and the work of ruin was well done.

Then the Rangers, having hit back at last, on the territory of their sworn foes, started upon the retreat to Texas.

A shallow ford was found, and the immense herds were gotten safely across before dawn and driven to a retreat, where a halt was called.

A better place for a halt could not have been found, for there was a natural wall of hills surrounding a meadow, where the captured cattle were driven.

Then, just at sunrise, the daring Rangers were about to seek much needed rest, when Buck Taylor, who had been reconnoitering the position, reported a party of horsemen in sight, riding toward the river.

And he added:

"Captain, this is Don Rafael's favorite crossing, and I would not be surprised if they are the Raiders, and if so, we can ambush them."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WAR OF THE AVENGERS.

As Buck Taylor had suspected, the horsemen coming across the prairie were the Mexican Raiders.

He had seen them from the hills, far out on the prairie, the dark mass being visible in the moonlight, for he had caught sight of them with his field-glass, a legacy from the Gambler Ranger.

Buck knew that the trail they were on skirted the hills and led to the Rio Grande, a couple of miles away.

So the Rangers, not needed to guard the passes of the valley, where the captured stock was corralled, were called to arms and lay in wait for their foes.

Don Rafael had crossed the Rio Grande at a ford some miles above, and just at the hour of sunset.

He had gone with full force, nearly a hundred men, and he meant to strike the settlements on the Texan border.

He had sent a spy ahead, who was to meet him at a given point and let him know just where the Rangers were, for the Don had reason to fear that wild Texan band.

The man met him, and the report he made was by no means good tidings.

He reported that the Texan Rangers, three-score strong, had gone toward the Rio Grande that very night.

The Comanches had fallen back to their strongholds, so the Texans could hardly be on their trail.

Don Rafael was a very shrewd man and an able commander, though a cruel foe.

He at once decided that the Rangers had gone into Mexican territory.

He knew that his acts had often been threatened with retaliation, and his spy, Rodriguez—or in other words Rolly Armstrong—had told him that Captain McNally anticipated a raid upon his camp.

The Texans then had, he supposed, gone upon their raid.

Not knowing that Armstrong was dead, and having arranged with him, as the reader has seen, a plan to ambush and destroy the Rangers, he decided to postpone his raid and hasten back to Mexican territory, hoping at the same time that he would not be too late.

So, without the suspicion of an ambush, and believing the Rangers then over on Mexican territory, Don Rafael and his Raiders came along at a gallop, heading for the Rio Grande.

The trail led close in around the hills, and, as the Mexicans, riding two abreast, and stretched out for a long distance, came on at a canter, the head of the line was allowed to pass, the more surely to damage the entire force.

As the center reached the spot where the Texans waited, all mounted and with revolvers in hand, a loud voice broke the silence with two words:

"Rangers charge!"

A wild yell in chorus from forty throats, a snorting of steeds, the thunder of hoofs, and then the rattle of revolvers.

The Mexican line recoiled like a frightened drove of sheep, and many saddles were emptied ere the Raiders began to form for resistance.

With his men in trouble, Don Rafael boldly charged back, a score of men behind him, and rushed upon the Rangers.

But the shot was met with a withering fire, the Raiders swayed back, and their line being cut in two, and many a man and horse down, they became panic-stricken and took to mad flight.

After them dashed the victorious Texans, and the music of revolvers mingled with the thunder of hoofs, the shouts of the combatants, and the neighing and snorting of horses in one grand chorus.

Over the moonlit plains dashed pursued and pursuers, and into the Rio Grande were driven the flying Raiders, and all who reached the river were not destined to get across, while many who had started out with merciless and murderous intent, found graves upon Texan soil.

It was a grand victory for the Rangers, and the heart of the young Cowboy King beat with pleasure as he rode into camp, and heard Captain McNally say:

"Buck, my daring comrade, we owe our grand success to you!"

With nothing to fear from the Raiders, the Texan Rangers took their time in reaching the settlements, where the horses and cattle they had captured were given to the settlers for a nominal sum, as was the wont of these brave defenders of the frontier, and the booty was distributed among those who claimed it, whether honestly or not, for much that was valuable had been taken from the border settlements by the red Raiders of the Rio Grande.

But it soon became known that Don Rafael, with his usual good luck, had escaped with about half of his command, and finding his retreat de-

stroyed, his men slain and cattle, horses and booty carried off, he vowed a fearful revenge.

From that day he became a worse terror on the Texan border than ever, and, allying himself with the Comanches, he began a little war against the Rangers.

On their part the Rangers felt that they must wipe out their foe, and Captain McNally changed his camping-ground from the Rangers' Ranch to a spot upon the Rio Grande, and at once began a struggle for victory between the Texan defenders and the Mexican outlaws that was known as the War of the Avengers, and bitter and merciless was the fight for mastery.

CHAPTER XXIL

ENTRAPPED.

DURING the war for revenge, between the Rangers and the Raiders, no man won greater fame as a daring scout than did Buck Taylor.

Many a lone scout did he go on, and through all he kept up his record as "boss of 'em all," as old Mack Hastings was wont to pat it.

The Rangers not only held their own, but they changed their camp to a point near the Rio Grande, and beat back both Mexican outlaws and Comanches whenever they sought to devastate Texan territory.

Upon one occasion Buck Taylor met with an adventure that well nigh ended his career as "King of the Cowboys."

It is with the marked incidents of the life of this daring cowboy that I would deal, for the minor deeds are by far too numerous, and this one should be told as he came out of it with unstinted praise.

He was on a lonely scout, and his desire was to capture a Mexican spy who he knew was wont to frequently carry tidings across the river to Don Rafael.

He had halted one night in a small ravine, and, being very tired had taken to his blankets after a cold supper, for he did not care to build a fire.

Hardly had he gotten asleep when dark forms appeared upon every side of him, and with terrific yells half a hundred red-skins rushed upon him.

They had seen him approaching the hills, and had hidden to ambush him.

It was night when he reached his camping place, so he saw no trails, and he suspected no danger, other than the peril he knew surrounded him for being in that part of the country.

Just then he had not thought of Indians, not expecting a raiding party to be in that locality.

Buck was surprised, as might be supposed, but, though awakened from his sound sleep, he arose in his might and a desperate battle began.

He got in but a couple of shots, and then, like a pack of wolves they were upon him.

They could have made a pin cushion of him, with their arrows, had they wished, but they knew their deadly foe and wanted him alive for their future pleasure.

His gigantic strength made him a hard man to handle, even after they had him in their grasp.

But at last they succeeded in bearing him to the ground and binding him with lariats until he looked like a mummy, all wrapped up as he was with ropes from head to feet.

It was a very long and sad night for Buck that he passed; but the Indians were up at dawn and the march to their village in the mountains was begun.

Roan King was mounted by the chief of the band, while Buck was tied on the back of the sorriest-looking mustang in the party.

That night the band reached their camp, and it was a strong one, situated in the very midst of the mountains, and as formidable as a pale-face fort.

The Indian village was wild with joy at the capture of one of their foes, a Texan Ranger, and one whom they knew but too well for Buck's peace of mind.

He was taken to the strong tepee of the village, and a guard was placed over him, while he was told that his career of usefulness was at an end.

Buck did not believe it.

He was not one to lose hope, until there was no ray of hope.

He felt sore after his hard struggle, and from being bound; but he was unhurt, and could get a chance he meant to make a strong fight for life.

With a mercy he had, not expected they released him of about half his bonds, though he was still bound too thoroughly to see any chance of getting away by his own exertions.

He was surely entrapped, and as he said himself, in his light-hearted way:

"They've got me dead to rights."

CHAPTER XXIII.

COMANCHE FRIENDSHIP.

WHEN the morning dawned in the Comanche village, Buck Taylor found that he was an object of great curiosity among the squaws and children.

He did not like the attention he received by any means, for they slapped his face, pulled his hair, and abused him shamefully.

But he took the abuse with the air of a stoic.

Among the children his eyes suddenly fell upon one whom a glance was sufficient to show was not a red-skin.

Her face was darkly bronzed from exposure, but there was no Indian blood in her veins, Buck felt well assured.

She was about twelve years of age, and as pretty as a picture.

Her dress was of the wild and picturesque character of the people among whom she dwelt, and she seemed to have an influence over the children she was with.

She came up to Buck in a timid kind of way, and gazing sadly at him, said in English:

"I feel sorry for you, sir, for they will kill you."

"Are you a captive of the Indians?" Buck asked.

"Yes, sir; I have been here for a long time it seems to me, and they treat me kindly."

"But then I am a child."

"What is your name?"

"Ruth McNally, sir, was my old name, but I am called here 'Snow Flower.'"

Buck started, and gazed fixedly at the girl.

Then he asked:

"Do you remember when you were brought here?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I can never forget it."

"Tell me of it."

"My father was away from home, and the Comanches came there and killed our cowboy defenders, and shot my little brother, because he struck an Indian warrior with his hatchet."

"They spared me and took me with them, and I have been here ever since; but I am not happy, for I do not know if mother and father are alive."

"Yes, my child, they are both alive, and I saw your father not three days ago."

"I belong to his company of Rangers."

"But we must not talk any more now; but if you can come here to-night and get me free of these bonds, and will find out where my weapons and horse are, I think I can be able to take you to your home."

"Oh, sir—" the girl's words were checked by a warning look from Buck, and soon after she turned away.

"I would give my right arm to take that little girl back to her father," mused Buck, and he at once began to plot and plan for escape.

Late in the afternoon Buck saw a tall chief approaching. As he drew near him he thought he recognized one he had seen before.

"It's my old, broken-leg pard," he muttered.

"My white brother is in trouble," said the chief as he halted near the prisoner.

"I'm in hard luck, chief, I admit."

"My brother was good to me one time."

"Don't mention it," said Buck in his light-hearted way.

"My braves say that my white brother must die."

"Oh, yes, they intend to roast me."

"No, my white brother must live."

"So I think."

"Was good to me, so I will be good to him."

"Do you mean it, chief?"

"Mad Wolf speaks with straighttongue."

"You are about the first red-skin I ever met that did," muttered Buck.

"Mad Wolf wants his white brother to become red-skin brave."

Buck shook his head.

"Marry red-skin squaw; be great chief."

"No, I will not turn red-skin."

"Must not die."

"No, but I won't turn red-skin."

"Then Mad Wolf save his white brother to-night."

"Will let him go."

"Mad Wolf, if you do this for me, I'll do as much for you another time."

"Good!"

"Mad Wolf will come before moon-rise," and the red-skin turned away.

"That means ten o'clock," muttered Buck.

Then he lay there in the tepee, waiting and plotting, until the little captive girl came with some food for him.

It was the first that he had had, and Mad Wolf had sent her.

There was no guard over him, for none was

considered necessary, bound as he was, and in the midst of the Indian camp.

The young girl fed him, for he was bound hand and foot, and she said:

"I'll come to-night, sir."

"My child, the chief, Mad Wolf, means to let me go, so I wish you to slip away, after all have gone to bed, and meet me at the canyon, where I noticed five trees growing together as I came here."

"I know the place, sir."

"Find out if you can where my horse is kept, and if you cannot do that, let me know where the red-skins keep their ponies, and we will secure a pair, and with the start we get we will get away from the Indians."

"I will be there, sir, and do all that I can to find out about your horse, for all the Indians are talking about the splendid animal."

Soon after little Ruth again left Buck to his thoughts, and eagerly he watched for the coming of night.

At last the shadows deepened, and an hour after nightfall the village was lost in sleep.

As a greater security against Buck's escape, he had been more securely bound, but was left in the tepee without a guard, and at this he was greatly pleased, and supposed that he had to thank the chief for it.

After awhile, when the minutes began to drag out to him like hours, he saw some one enter the tepee.

"My white brother is awake?" asked a voice.

"You bet I am, chief."

"He can go, but he must appear to untie his own bonds and get away."

"Here is a bow and arrows for him, as I can give him nothing else."

"He is a great warrior, and, with the night to cover his trail, he can be far away when the sun comes."

"You are as kind as you can be, chief, and I thank you, for I know you would fare bad with your people if they knew what you did."

The chief had, in the mean while, unfastened his bonds, and Buck arose to his feet, feeling very lame and numb.

"I will leave my white brother now," and the chief turned away.

Buck stretched himself, rubbed his arms and legs to get up a circulation, and stepped out of the tepee.

The chief had gone, and all was still in the camp, excepting the yelping of an Indian dog.

He quickly got his bearings, and with his blanket wrapped about him, to look like an Indian, he stalked along through the village and left it without meeting a single prowling red-skin.

He remembered the way he had been brought to the village, and hastened along as fast as his benumbed limbs could carry him, to the rendezvous he had appointed with Ruth McNally.

His own luck had been so good, that he feared he would not meet the girl there; but, as he reached the entrance to the canyon, he suddenly discovered her.

"Oh, sir, I feared you would not come," she said, as she grasped his hand.

"Yes, I'm here all right, and I'm awful glad you are."

"But what about the horses?"

"I've got your horse, sir."

"Do you mean it?" eagerly said Buck.

"Yes, sir, the chief Mad Wolf had him tied up back of his tepee, and I took him, and another horse for me to ride."

"And I got your rifle and belt of arms too, sir."

"You are a daisy, little Miss McNally; but if old Mad Wolf don't swear in choice Injun at this, I'll eat my boots."

"Why he'll think after he set me free I stole my horse from him."

"It is your horse, sir, and in stealing the weapons I knew they were yours."

"He had them all hidden under a bear robe."

"You've got dead oodles of sense, little one, and no mistake."

"But don't let us stay here, for it's far from healthy."

She led the way to where the horses were, and Buck gave an exclamation of delight, as he saw that the Roan King was also saddled and bridled.

"You got there too!"

"Yes, sir, for they were near the horse."

A small mustang was near Roan King, and upon his back Ruth sprung without assistance, and mounting, as soon as he had buckled on his weapons, Buck Taylor started on the long trail to the Rangers' camp.

He pushed on, as fast as the little mustang ridden by Ruth could travel, and rode into the

camp in the afternoon, just as Captain McNally had lighted his after-dinner pipe.

One cry of joy, as he recognized his child, and the Ranger captain clasped her in his arms, while Buck hastened away to leave them alone together.

When the young Texan's story was told, it was no wonder that the Rangers cheered him and said that he was indeed entitled to be called King of Cowboys.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RANGER SPY.

To show the Mexican Raiders of Don Rafael that they were constantly on the watch for them, the Rangers moved their camp to a situation on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The scenery was wild and picturesque, and from their camp they could see the Mexican sentinel always kept on duty, on a cliff across the river, and each day Don Rafael was wont to appear and inspect the Rangers' camp with his glass, for he was out of range of their rifles.

Captain McNally was so overjoyed at the return of his daughter, that he determined to allow no chance for her recapture, and so he took her with him to the town where her mother then was in a private asylum.

He was gone but ten days, but when he returned his face wore a happy look, and he told his faithful Rangers how the sight of her child had brought back reason to the brain of Mrs. McNally, and the mother and child he had left together.

He told his men also that there was a great deal of talk about Don Rafael's raids into Texas, in the face of the Rangers, and said that they must arrange some plan to capture the daring Mexican outlaw.

Many plans were talked over, for the captain said, with the getting back to the home of his wife and daughter, he intended to give up his command soon of the Rangers, and therefore wished to signal his retirement by the capture of the outlaw chief.

"Once Don Rafael is our prisoner, and his men will disperse," he said.

At last Buck said:

"I have a plan, sir, if you will consent to it."

All eyes were turned upon the speaker.

As Buck Taylor had a plan, all felt that it must be a daring one.

"Out with it, Buck."

"We are in full view of the Mexican sentinel on the other side of the river."

"Yes, sir."

"Every day, about at the same hour, Don Rafael rides up to the cliff, from his camp, and reviews our encampment."

"He does."

"Well, sir, we can always see him as he leaves the plain before he ascends to the cliff, and to-morrow, if you will have a guard set to report his coming, I will be ready for my little act."

"And what is that, Buck?"

"It will be, sir, to pretend to have trouble with you in camp."

"We can appear to quarrel, you can start toward me, I will fire my revolver, you fall as though dead, and I make a rush for my horse, Roan King."

"The boys can open with their revolvers, as though firing at me, and I will ride straight for the river and—"

"But there is the chasm between you and the river, Buck."

"That's a part of my plan, sir."

"Well."

"I shall leap it."

A chorus of "ohs!" went up at this bold assertion.

"Leap that chasm, Buck!"

"Yes, captain."

"No horse can do it."

"Roan King can."

"I know that he is a wonderful leaper, but—"

"You have seen him leap as far."

"Yes, but not over a chasm a hundred feet deep."

"I shall leap it, sir, never fear, for the Mexicans have camped right where we are many a time, and they know the chasm well, and how wide and deep it is."

"Of course they would not expect any man to take such a leap for the pure fun of it, and it will add to the belief that I have killed you and am flying for my life."

"I will then spring Roan King from the bank into the river, for it is only about ten feet, and swim across."

"Of course they will see all, and run to my aid, as the boys must mount, head the chasm, and fire

at me as I swim across, only I insist upon not being hit."

"I shall tell Don Rafael that I have killed you and seek to join his band."

"My hatred for you all shall be intense, and I will offer to arrange to lead his band upon your camp by a secret trail and surprise you."

"I will arrange with you, captain, just my plan, and you can all keep on the alert each night for it, until it comes off, for I'll fetch 'em in time."

"Now, you know my little game, and I'll go out and take a look at the chasm, to get the best spot to take the leap."

Captain McNally and his brother Rangers in vain tried to dissuade Buck Taylor from his daring resolve.

He was determined, and he felt sure that Don Rafael and his band could be wiped out by just such a bold scheme.

To go into the camp of the Mexicans and claim to be a deserter, he knew would cause his instant death as a spy.

To appear to kill his captain, and escape by such a desperate leap, as over that frightful chasm, and then down into the river, he was assured would get for him the credit of having fled for his life.

So it was arranged at last, when all saw that Buck was determined to go into the camp of the Raiders as a spy.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LEAP.

On the day set for Buck Taylor's bold plot to outwit the Raiders, he had Roan King in the finest condition.

Back over the hill he had put on the saddle and bridle with a nicety he had never before done, and every superfluous ounce of weight was taken off.

Then Buck waited until the man on the watch reported that Don Rafael and four companions were crossing the plain toward the hill, where the Mexican sentinel stood.

At once Buck prepared to mount, and, at a signal did so, and came riding into camp as though just returned from a scout.

Captain McNally had started to cross the plaza of the camp at the same time, and the Rangers were lying about here and there, apparently enjoying the balmy day.

The sentinel on the cliff was seen to be watching the Ranger camp with his glass, and a few moments after Don Rafael and four other horsemen appeared back on the hills, riding toward the cliff where the man on watch stood.

Then the pantomime began among the Rangers.

The captain seemed to beckon to Buck, who dismounted and approached him, leading Roan King.

Then they appeared to be quarreling fiercely, and the Rangers were seen to spring up and approach them.

Suddenly Buck Taylor drew a revolver and fired.

The captain also fired, but staggered back, and Buck gave another shot.

Instantly the captain sunk to the ground, and turning quickly, Buck Taylor sprung into his saddle and darted away.

At first he started, as though to dash down the valley; but Rangers ran out, as if to head him off, and he wheeled back, halted, and then headed for the cliff.

All this was seen from the cliff across the river.

Buck Taylor and Captain McNally were well known to the Mexicans, and they had no idea that a mimic tragedy was being enacted for their benefit.

Then they saw some of the Rangers run to the captain, who lay motionless, but so that he could see Buck's desperate leap.

They heard the popping of the revolvers, and saw Buck turn in his saddle and fire back again.

Then he settled himself in his saddle and headed for the chasm.

"He can never make it," cried Don Rafael in his excitement.

Breathlessly all watched now, and the Rangers stood looking at their dashing comrade as though spellbound.

Straight for the chasm went the gallant roan.

Firm as a sack Buck sat, his hand upon the rein, and ready for the fearful leap.

None knew better than did he the fearful risk he ran, and he nerved himself to it.

He was pale, but calm, and the reckless light so natural to his eyes, shone there.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the chasm, and when almost upon it, he said to his horse:

"Now old fellow don't fail or the Equine King and the Cowboy King are gone down sure."

An instant more and he cried:

"Now, sir!"

The gallant roan was fairly flying; he gave a wild snort as if he knew what was expected of him, and with a mighty bound shot up into the air and forward.

There was a moment of fearful suspense to all, and then the Roan King came down—upon the other bank!

A yell of wild admiration broke from the Mexicans, and was echoed by the Rangers, and Captain McNally found it hard work to play dead.

But he did so, while the Rangers mounted and started in pursuit.

But they had a ride of a quarter of a mile around the chasm, and Buck had dashed down the slope to the river-bank.

A leap of ten feet into the water, and the roan started for the other shore;

Leaving the cliff, Don Rafael and the others spurred down to meet him, and they opened with their rifles across the river at the Rangers, to protect Buck's escape.

At last the Roan King reached the shore, and Buck called out in Spanish:

"I'm a fugitive, senor, not a foe, and seek refuge with you."

"You shall have it, senor, for a bolder leap for life never was made."

"Come, we are in danger here."

The Don placed himself by the side of the Ranger, and they dashed away together, while Buck told him as they rode along, of his quarrel with Captain McNally and the result, as it appeared to the Mexicans.

The Don was a fine-looking, but cruel-faced Mexican, and he was delighted to know of the death of the Ranger captain, while he was also most pleased that he was to have the Cowboy King as one of his outlaw band.

But, sly as was the Raider chief, Buck Taylor had thus far shown him that he could give him odds and beat him, where it was a game of life and death, for not the shadow of a suspicion was felt against him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RANGER'S NET.

WHEN Buck Taylor was received in the camp of the Raiders, he felt that his life was in the deadliest peril.

One atom of suspicion against him, and his career would end right there.

But his game was a bold and a plausible one, to enter the lines of the enemy and endeavor to entrap them.

Don Rafael knew him well by reputation, and also he had seen him in action on a number of occasions.

He remembered him as the young Ranger who had captured the wild Equine King, and who had escaped his men also, in many a fierce flight.

He was aware also that he had been the one in camp with his spy, Roddy Armstrong, and had cleverly escaped assassination at his hands.

Cunning himself, he little suspected that he was being fooled, for it all had seemed so natural, and he was glad to welcome Buck Taylor into his band as an outlaw.

And more, the Mexican Raider chief was pleased greatly with the young Ranger, and they had long talks over what could be done on Texan soil that Buck could aid them to perform.

The Don took Buck into his mess, an honor he had bestowed on no one else, and if his Mexican comrades were envious of the favor shown the Texan, they did not make it known to him.

But Buck knew that he must act quickly, for it might leak out in some way that Captain McNally was not dead, and that the whole affair was a boax.

So he suggested to the Raider captain that what was done against the Rangers should be quickly done.

He led the outlaw to believe that the whole Texan force was not in camp, and that the unguarded way that was open as an approach to the encampment might soon be thoroughly guarded.

"My idea would be, Senor Captain," he said, "to strike the Ranger camp at night, and annihilate them."

"Yes."

"Then recross the river with your booty, and again recrossing further up to the Texas shore, raid the settlements as far as you choose, for there would be no dread of your being cut off, with the Rangers no longer in existence."

"A good idea, Senor Taylor; but would you advise me to take my whole force to attack the Rangers?"

"Every man of them, sir."

"I could cross with eighty men."

"Good, senor, you *might* need them all."

"This would leave me but half a dozen in camp."

"You would have no use for them, except as a guard to the camp and cattle."

"True, so I will follow your advice."

"I am anxious to lead you, senor, that a blow may be struck."

"But when would you say go?"

"To-night would be best, for they would not believe that I could gain your confidence so soon, to cause you to make an attack, while, having all of them fired upon me, as I escaped, they will naturally think I will be revengeful and would soon urge you to assail them."

"You are right, senor."

"Then, Senor Chief, a camp without a captain, you know, would necessarily be demoralized."

"I will give orders to prepare for the march to-night," said the Don with great enthusiasm, and Buck smiled blandly.

Soon after nightfall the Raiders left their camp fourscore strong.

At their head was their cruel chief, and by his side rode Buck Taylor, cool and hopeful for the result.

Following his guidance implicitly, the Don crossed the river where he deemed it best, and then they moved on toward the point where Buck said no guard was kept over the Ranger camp.

Halting when near the timber, Buck suggested that he should dismount and go ahead to see if there was any guard there, placed on duty since he had left.

"If there is, I'll settle it with him," he said, significantly, and the Don took his words to mean that he would kill him.

But the words had a double meaning, as the reader can understand.

Leaving his horse and rifle with the Raiders, Buck advanced cautiously on foot.

It was not long before he saw a form ahead.

"Ho, Buck, is that you?"

"Yes."

"I'm Sol."

"All right. I came forward to see if I could find some one."

"We were watching and saw you cross, and the boys are ready."

"Good! I will lead the Raiders by the lower canyon, and you can head them there, closing in behind them, too; only remember that I am no Raider."

"Now go and send a half-dozen men to the ford, for if any escape they will ride there and be cut off, for no one must get back to warn the camp, as I wish to lead a party back there to-night, when we have finished the Don and his gang."

"Good! you have done splendidly, Buck; but now go back and detain them an hour and we'll be all ready."

Buck Taylor went back and rejoining the Don said:

"Senor Chief, the camp is not quiet yet, so we had better wait awhile until they go to bed."

"It would be better, for how many men do you think are in camp?"

"About fifty, sir."

"All right, they are fifty bad men to handle, and we must surprise them, so let us wait."

Buck gave a little over the hour asked by Sol Bradford, before he suggested an advance, and then they moved forward.

As they rode along the brain of the young Ranger was busy, trying to see how he could make sure of the chief and not kill him.

At last an idea struck him, just as they drew near the canyon.

All the horses had mufflers on to prevent their neighing, and pieces of blanket had been tied over their hoofs at the last halting place, so the column moved along almost noiselessly.

As he thought of a plan, Buck said:

"Senor, let the men halt here, and will you kindly ride on with me, to where we can view the camp?"

"If all is quiet, you can call your men by the howl of a wolf, which I can imitate exactly, for we will not be two hundred yards from them."

The Don seemed to have perfect confidence in the Texan, and passing the word back to his men to wait, while he rode on, and then to advance, at their hearing the howl of a wolf, he rode on with Buck.

They entered the canyon, which Buck knew

was watched by the Rangers, and he only hoped no one would make a mistake and spoil all.

When he got a little over a hundred yards away from the men, he leant over and whispered to the Don.

At that instant he suddenly seized the throat of the outlaw chief in his grip of steel, and thrust his revolver in his face, while he said sternly:

"Hands up, senor, or die!"

The Mexican was wholly surprised, caught of his guard, and could do nothing in that giant grasp of the Texan.

In an instant Buck had disarmed him, and then, hanging his belt of arms upon his saddle-horn, he took his lariat and began to coil it around the body of the Don, pinioning his arms close to his side, and also making him fast to his saddle.

Having thus secured the Mexican chief, he suddenly gave an exact imitation of the howl of a wolf.

Then he rode on, taking the Mexican with him, and reaching the end of the canyon, hastily made the horse of his prisoner fast to a tree.

The Mexican outlaws were now not far away, coming through the canyon, and like a trumpet rung Buck's command:

"Rangers, fire! there's your game!"

From the secreted Rangers came a terrible volley, emptying many a saddle, and the flashes of their revolvers, for the fire was at close range, lit up the dark canyon, revealing to the panic-stricken Raiders that they were entrapped.

Out from their lurking-places now charged the Texans, for they were not men to fight from cover, with no danger to themselves, and that wild canyon at once became the scene of a desperate hand-to-hand fight on horseback.

But the Mexicans were demoralized, many had fallen under the first volley, and hemmed in, they tried to break away and find safety in flight.

A few went through in the mad rush, but others were caught, and still more cried for quarter, which, though they had never shown it to Texans, was given them.

But those who escaped from the canyon were fired upon at the river, and believing that each ford was guarded and that to attempt escape was useless, they too cried for mercy and became prisoners, though they gnashed their teeth with rage when they discovered that over a score had surrendered to half a dozen men.

Hardly had they been bound, when there was heard the trampling of hoofs, and Buck Taylor and some thirty Rangers came along at a gallop.

"Which way, Buck?" shouted a Texan.

"Over the river to take in the Mexican camp, for they've got dead oodles o' stock there; but did any get across?"

"Not one."

"And the boys back in camp have the balance."

"But did they catch the Don?"

"Oh! yes, he's a prisoner," and Buck and his party passed on.

It was after sunrise some time before they were seen coming back, and they had with them two prisoners from the outlaw camp, and the horses and cattle which were there, and which had been captured from Texan settlers.

When Buck reached the Rangers' camp, the cheers that greeted him were deafening, and Captain McNally wrung his hand over and over again, while he said:

"Now, Buck, with the hanging of this Raider chief this cruel Rio Grande war will end."

"Let us end the war at once, Captain McNally," replied Buck, in his light-hearted way.

"Without trial?"

"What's the use of having a jury to tell us what we know?"

"The man is guilty of the vilest crimes, and if he is hanged you can try his men, or turn them loose and let Judge Lynch sit on their case."

"They are a murderous lot, Buck; and shall be sent to prison until they can be tried; but Captain Rafael must hang now," said the captain sternly.

Then he gave orders for the dead to be buried, the Mexican prisoners to be mustered, to witness the execution of their chief, and when the sun set that night, Don Rafael, the Raider of the Rio Grande, was in his grave.

But he had died silently and with courage, showing less fear than did his men, who gazed upon his execution.

He had asked Buck to request that he might be shot, and not hanged, and the young Ranger had begged it of Captain McNally.

The request had been granted, and Buck selected six men to do the shooting, and he gave the orders for the firing.

That the Rangers were dead shots, may be inferred from the fact that the weapons of execution were revolvers, and six bullets entered the heart of the Mexican Raider, who fell without a moan, and with the grim defiant smile still resting upon his handsome, but cruel and merciless face.

The Mexican prisoners were taken off to the towns and distributed among several prisons, while, at the trial that followed, many were recognized, and proven to have committed murder upon Texan soil, so were executed, while the others were imprisoned for a term of years.

Each and all of them swore vengeance upon Buck Taylor, threatening to kill him when they got out; but, as they have been released for years, and the gallant Cowboy Ranger still lives, it but serves to carry out the old saying that a "threatened man is long-lived."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE retirement of Captain McNally from the command of the Texan Rangers was the cause of Buck Taylor's also leaving the band, for he had decided to turn ranchero on a small scale.

Having effected the capture of Don Rafael, and the utter breaking up of his outlaw band, and the Comanches having sued for peace, at least for awhile, Buck decided that there would be little to do as a Ranger, so purchased some cattle, and established a small ranch of his own.

He was not long among the prairie ranchmen before he showed that his title of King of the Cowboys was well deserved, and his fame as such is now known over the entire Southwest.

As a proof that my story of this famous Texan is no fiction, but based upon stern facts, I append the following notice of him, written by an army officer for a New York paper, in an article headed:

"REAL HEROES OF THE PLAINS.

"BUCK TAYLOR,

"KING OF THE COWBOYS.

"W.M. LEVI TAYLOR, known to his associates as 'Buck,' was born at Fredericksburg, Gillespie County, Texas, and is now about thirty years of age. Frontiersmen come from all grades of society and from all classes of people, who develop peculiarities of their early surroundings and circumstances; therefore it is seldom the Eastern public meet face to face one so thoroughly 'to the manner born' or who is so completely a typical Westerner by ancestry, birth and heritage of association as this noted herdsman, whose eminence is based on the sterling qualities that rank him as a 'King of the Cowboys.'

"His family lived in Taos, in the Lone Star State, when tributary to Mexico; fought for its independence with Crockett and Colonel Travis at the Alamo, where a grandfather and uncle fell—under Sam Houston at San Jacinto, and after success had crowned a new empire with liberty, but two male members of the family were left, 'Buck's' father and a younger brother.

"Joining the Texas Cavalry at the outbreak of the late war, his father was killed in one of the first skirmishes, and in two years after, his mother dying, left him when about eight years old dependent upon his ranchman uncle and good luck to wrestle for existence.

"Texas—always famous for its immense herds of cattle roaming at will over the vast and fertile plains, was then, as now, the supply camp of the trade—gave unusual facilities; in fact, required the cultivation of sturdy qualities to follow daily a life so replete with privations, hardship and danger that it is a marvel to the luxuriously raised how a man can voluntarily assume it, much less come to actually like it to infatuation. Still this solitary life, with its excitements and adventures, has its charms for its votaries, who, often knowing of none other, never weary of its continuous duties, trials and exposures.

"Taylor from his childhood then knew no other ambition than to try and excel in his occupation, and inheriting a strong physique, he early became hardy and proficient in horsemanship, lassoing, and general 'cow-sense.'

"Becoming able, he soon became famous as a 'boss of the outfit' on the ranges and on the trail, conducting vast herds over the 'Chisholm' to the Northern markets, leading in the stampede, excelling on the round-up, and gaining such distinction as a rider and tamer of the mustang and broncho that his surname has become obsolete among his confederates, and he is known from Idaho to the Rio Grande by the cognomen of 'Buck.' A title worthily won in a profession of great risk and danger, and which his appearance in daily public exhibitions gives a very good idea of, but when seen in the corral among herds of the obstinate equines challenges the admiration of the spectator and the envy of his kind.

"His remarkable dexterity won the attention of Buffalo Bill, and he secured his services for several seasons on his ranch on the Dismal River, where his

feats of strength, easily throwing a steer by the horns or tail, lassoing and tying single-handed, his mastery of wild horses, caused his engagement with the review of prairie-land, 'The Wild West.'

"Standing six feet three and a half inches, with a powerful, well-proportioned frame, possessed of a strength that is marvelous, he is a fine representative of his class.

"Amiable as a child, 'Buck's' genial qualities combined with his well-known abilities, make him a favorite not only with his fellows, but on his first visit East last summer easily had the same position accorded him by an admiring public."

Captain McNally, of the Rangers, is now a very wealthy man, owning large cattle interests in the South and West, and his wife is his happy companion, while Ruth, their lovely daughter, dwells with her parents, for though she is married, they would not give her up.

Old Mark Hastings is now captain of the Rangers, and poor Sol Bradford was killed in a personal difficulty some years ago.

So ends my story, kind reader, of the adventurous life of the King of the Cowboys.

THE END.

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